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ARTICLE REPRINT

No. U9707A

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A
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HARVARD BUSINESS
SCHOOL PUBLISHING

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Don't Avoid Conflicts—Manage Them

by Monci J. Williams

CONFLICT ON THE horizon? Got a good reason for taking the easy way out?

Well of course we do. The lady in the Lennon-McCartney lyric had a character flaw: She was “a day tripper,” someone who avoided entanglement by skipping out. When it comes to conflict and its avoidance, we each have our own reasons. There are people and institutional issues, that will—if we let them—soak up our time and attention like a sponge. Most of us are hard-wired to experience tension at even the whiff of trouble, a reflex that prepares us to fight or flee when threatened. And any obstacle between us and the 63 tasks we must complete by Friday (no, Thursday; it’s a short week) looms as an annoyance. So we do have a good reason for taking the easy way out: It’s expedient.

Or so we think. But here comes (yet) another important insight in the life of a Post-Modern Manager, one that may enable him or her to make a quantum leap in productivity and effectiveness. Ducking conflict, say the experts, may actually make it harder for us to achieve our goals.

Conflict arises from people’s needs, and needs unmet do not go away. They just lie in wait for the next opportunity to express themselves, which in organizational life usually means they will continue to get in the way of something we want or need to get done. Says Ellen Raider, director of training in the International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution at Columbia University, “When conflict is riding, energy is directed away from tasks, and engaged instead in interpersonal issues. If you manage

the conflict, people are freed to put their focus back on the tasks.”

Edna Adler, a colleague of Raider’s who does conflict resolution training in New York City, views conflict management skills as productivity tools. “Premature agreements, made before conflict is aired and resolved, don’t last,” she says. Yes, a powerful manager may be able to push through a compromise that doesn’t fully address long-term business issues or individual ego needs. But he—or his subordinates—will likely spend a lot of time patching up the parts of the agreement that keep coming unglued.

“There is a difference between compliance and commitment,” says Raider. “When one person is compelled to a premature agreement in which his needs are not met, he is going to get you back. He may sabotage you passive-aggressively, by foot-dragging and stalling. Or he may just get you in the back.”

Intramural fratricide aside, negotiating conflict is more fundamental to the work of the manager than ever. In the age of the flat organization, “managers are constantly negotiating with colleagues about rights and resources,” observes Michael Wheeler, a professor of management at Harvard Business School. Wheeler co-directs the Dispute Resolution Project at the Program on Negotiation, a collaboration between Harvard, MIT, and Tufts.

Sorting out responsibilities and resources has increasingly become the work of teams. But consultants, academics, trainers, and battle-decorated team veterans all note that teams

usually do beautifully only until they bump up against their first conflict. “For all the cheerful talk about team building,” says Wheeler, “unless we find creative ways to resolve conflict, the imperative to work together can be a burden.”

The best way to deal with conflict effectively is to radically change the way you think about it. Mary Parker Follett, a fabled management theorist, writer, and consultant, laid down the foundation for modern thinking about the resolution of conflict more than 60 years ago. Follett suggested we “think of conflict as neither good nor bad . . . not as warfare, but as the appearance of difference.” Furthermore, Follett said, since “conflict—difference—is here in the world . . . instead of condemning it, we should set it to work for us.”

Follett viewed the appearance of differences as an opportunity to improve things that weren’t working. Surprisingly, and correctly, Follett said that compromise was unlikely to be the optimal solution to a problem, an observation that was echoed decades later in research on the effectiveness of collaborative versus competitive approaches to negotiation, and in management theorist Herbert A. Simon’s Nobel-prize winning work on managerial decisionmaking and “satisficing.”

Again anticipating the work (and some of the buzz words) of today’s consultants, Follett condemned compromise as a mediocre response, and suggested that we aim for “break-through” solutions in which “neither side has to sacrifice anything” and the desires of both sides are “integrated.” That’s sometimes easier done than one might think, as Follett illustrated with the story of a dairy cooperative that nearly fell apart because of a relatively trivial fight over delivery rituals. The creamery was built on the side of a hill, and the dairymen whose route to the dairy took them down the

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hill thought they should unload their milk first. The dairymen whose route took them up the hill thought their unloading should take precedence.

An expedient solution, a compromise designed to reduce the amount of time spent on conflict, might entail giving each group a chance to “go first” by alternating deliveries. It took a mediator to suggest the optimal solution: Change the position of the platform so that both groups of dairymen could “go first,” unloading their milk cans at the same time.

True, some conflicts cannot be resolved unless one party, or both, give something up. And some conflicts can never be resolved because one or more of the parties would rather fight than work things out. But if you wish to proceed from the idea that you and your partner(s) in conflict can have it all, a breakthrough solution that satisfies everyone, these additional tips from the experts should help.

1 **What people demand is not necessarily what they must have to be satisfied.**

The difference between the two lies in the distinction between “positions” taken in a dispute and “underlying needs.” Conflict resolution trainers use “the orange,” another classic Follett example, to illustrate. A mother has two children and one orange. The children are fighting over the orange, so the mother cuts it in half and gives a half to each. But as it turned out, while one child was hungry and wanted to eat the fruit, the other child wanted only the rind, so she could make candied orange peels. Each party got half of what it wanted when both could have been fully satisfied.

The story illustrates a classic bungle in problem solving—the failure to probe for the real underlying need or want. Advice from the experts: Don’t assume you understand what’s going

on. Find out, by asking questions, proposing alternative solutions, and exploring the responses of all parties.

2 **If you’re in a negotiation, don’t think your main task is to assert your needs. Your first job is to understand the other party.**

The next time you see a conflict boiling up, you may notice that both parties repeatedly assert their own needs and wishes, and tell each other why the other guy is wrong. The experts call this the “attack/defend spiral,” and it’s where most of us flame out.

Conflict resolution trainers recommend using neutral “opening” and “informing” statements to encourage the other person to open up. Comments such as “I know we’ve both been very concerned about X, but I also noticed that Y is very important to you; I’d like to understand that better” encourage the other person to talk about her concerns and wants. Get in the habit of seeing the other person’s position and demands as valid.

3 **Concentrate on common interests, not differences.**

Focusing first on the ways in which you are “at one” with your opponent will bring you closer to agreement. Discussing differences without defining—and returning—to common ground will widen the gap between you.

4 **Get to know your own hot buttons and needs.**

What we bring to a conflict—suspicion, anger, the conviction we can’t win—may drive the conflict in directions we become helpless to correct.

To cite an example based on a real-world situation, a male economist

moved from the No. 2 slot running the economic forecasting department of a large money management firm to take over the forecasting department at a slightly smaller competitor. His new subordinate, a highly competent economist, had researched and written her forecasts with little interference from her old boss. But her new boss second-guessed every draft she gave him, and she was forced to spend hours rewriting her work. With each barrage of skeptical feedback, her irritability increased.

The two were experiencing a clash in identity needs. She had a strong need for autonomy and deep pride of authorship. But he derived a strong sense of himself from his nose for trends, and from his previous department’s track records for accurate forecasting. For situations like these, Roger Fisher and William Ury, authors of *Getting to Yes*, suggest stepping back—which they call “retiring to the balcony”—to get an overview of what’s really happening during a conflict.

A view from the balcony might make clear to the female economist that her new boss wasn’t attacking her competence. He was, for legitimate reasons, merely asserting his own. She might explore giving him an outline before she writes her drafts, and dropping in to exchange intelligence so she can integrate his thinking into her writing.

5 **Just to complicate matters: Remember that there are times when avoiding conflict is the right thing to do.**

Some conflicts do dissolve with time. Some institutional issues may be bigger than you and your antagonist, resolvable only by senior management, leaving you and your colleagues to work around it.

Whether you go around a conflict or tackle it head on, the range and desirability of the solutions you create

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will expand if you make a considered choice on how you respond. The work of the manager is made more complex by the diffusion of authority and competition for resources in the flat organization. But however changed, the game still belongs to those who think through what they are doing, how others are likely to react, and why. ■

If you want to learn more . . .

Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement without Giving In by Roger Fisher and William Ury (1981, Viking Penguin, 161 pp., \$8.95, Tel. 800-526-0275)

Mary Parker Follett: Prophet of Management, edited by Pauline Graham (1995, Harvard Business School Press, 309 pp., \$29.95, Tel. 800-988-0886 or 617-496-1449)

No Contest: The Case Against Competition by Alfie Kohn (1992, Houghton Mifflin, 320 pp., \$11.95, Tel. 800-526-0275)

■ Reprint # U9707A