

Sorry, You've Got to

BY MARK LANDSBERG

As uncomfortable as it may be, leaders can't avoid confronting conflicts among members of their top team. Failure to prepare your team members to deal with contentious situations can create serious individual and organizational performance problems.



In one instance, the top divisional team of a major healthcare company headquartered in the Northeast went from being poster child for effective alignment to being a disorganized, demotivated group.

An ethical issue was the trigger, but it became clear to the CEO that there was a bigger problem behind the situation. Simply replacing the team's general manager wouldn't prevent a repetition of the team's failure to deal with a potentially contentious situation honestly and openly. Similar problems would arise no matter who was at the helm. The president decided to address the issue by making conflict management a core competency of every executive on the team.

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT AS A CORE COMPETENCY

What had stood in the way of an aligned team dealing honestly and openly with its leader? Why the long delay before any action was taken by the team members? After all, this was the *top leadership team* of a \$1.6 billion division. Why didn't it show more leadership?

The president posed these questions to the team; our assignment was to help team members find answers and develop solutions. Here's what we discovered: No amount of strategic clarity, balance scorecarding or process coaching can rescue a leadership team that does not know how—or is not willing—to effectively manage conflict. And learning to do so requires more than a series of formal structural and process changes.

Becoming comfortable with confrontation and conflict is one of the most difficult challenges

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Manage CONFLICT



any manager must master. To be successful, a team has to be aligned around goals, roles and responsibilities, performance measures and processes. But this formal, group alignment is just the beginning. Effective conflict management, especially at senior levels, requires fundamental, individual change, along with change in the quality of business relationships. And it is the private revolution that is always hardest.

To understand what had gone wrong and why, we asked the team to hold up a mirror to its own behavior. This was done by privately soliciting the input of each team member, then sharing the consolidated data with the full group.

First, we asked each person to rate team behavior on a 1-to-5 scale, on a number of questions, such as: “From *wary, closed, with hidden agendas* to *candid, open, relaxed, easy to speak your mind*, how would you rate the working atmosphere within the team?”

A series of qualitative questions were also posed. For example: “What obstacles prevent—or are likely to prevent—me from effectively fulfilling my role as a team member?”

The consolidated data gave a clear picture of what this team was all about, and indicated that it had a long way to go before it could become a high-performing team: one in which conflict would not be permitted to get in the way of results.

THE JOURNEY FROM MERE ALIGNMENT TOWARD HIGH PERFORMANCE

The responses and subsequent full-group discussion sent a seismic shock wave through the team. Members realized that they were going to have to work hard to progress from alignment to high performance. Key to the journey would be learning to turn conflict avoidance into conflict management.

The team made the transition successfully. In the process, it developed a new operating charter that dealt head-on with conflict. It captured the good work that the team had done in

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examining its behavior, but went way beyond it, to add the following five core elements:

1. Reframing the inner conversation about change. Many executives believe that conflict is the social equivalent of original sin. But conflict can be an opportunity to put issues on the table and work toward change. Surely, one element of leadership is to challenge and change the *status quo*. It may not win you any popularity contests, but it is critical to success.

The healthcare team members discovered that they had been focused more on accommodating their leader—on getting along—than on bringing about change. Their “inner” conversation had told them that conflict was bad. Paradoxically, when they changed that conversation to neutralize conflict—to accept the fact that it is neither good nor bad but simply “is”—*they were able to be comfortable with the discomfort that accompanies conflict.*

2. Establishing protocols for confrontation and conflict. Conflict is the stuff of organizational reality. It is embedded in the goal-setting process, in establishing clear responsibilities and accountabilities and in the quality of business relationships. The healthcare team initially tackled the first two areas, finding it relatively easy to do so. Not surprisingly, the team had some trouble with the third area: business relationships. This is an area that is often dismissed, especially by tough-minded managers, as so much “soft” fluff. But the healthcare team knew from experience that such fluff could easily become a steel barrier to high performance.

To prevent this from happening, the team set up “protocols” for their interaction. Protocols are rules of engagement, both within a team and in its interaction with others. They stipulate the appropriate behaviors for carrying on disagreement and ensure the integrity of business relationships, especially during the flashpoints of disagreement. The team realized that it lacked an agreed-upon way to both challenge the leader and then escalate the conversation to the next level. One protocol the team put in place was, “no triangulation.” In other words, if there is a disagreement with another team member, deal with it one-on-one. Don’t recruit supporters.

3. Depersonalizing feedback. The general manager had feared feedback, both from the president and from his subordinates. He had viewed feedback and the open discussion of issues as a zero-sum situation in which there were winners and losers. Stonewalling and artful dodging had been his way of avoiding the risk of losing.

The new operating charter encouraged team members to treat feedback and the give-and-take of open exchange and disagreement as a business case. In other words, the issue under review, whatever it may be, is not about “me” but about the way I do my job. The team members also learned skills for giving and accepting feedback. Giving feedback became focused on observable behavior, not feelings; receiving feedback became a matter of job performance and business success, not an indicator of self-worth.

4. Rescripting “going-in stories.” The general manager’s “going-in story”—the belief that he held about the situation—was this: “I must control what has to be done. I’m closer to the

customer than Corporate is. I need to operate independently.” The team also had a “story”: “If we press our leader, our friend, we may have to redefine our relationship. And he may seek retribution.”

Perceptions frame expectations about what will happen in a given situation. These, in turn, give rise to going-in stories that become our shorthand way of interpreting and dealing with reality. These stories can hijack open discussion and severely limit our options, as the healthcare team discovered. To rescript their “going-in stories,” team members learned to use the input of their colleagues to test their perceptions. And they learned to become comfortable sharing personal perceptions with one another. Conflict will never become a progressive force unless you open up and put your perceptions on the table.

5. Continuing the revolution. There is truth to the adage suggesting that what we permit we promote. The healthcare team realized that managing conflict to create a high-performance environment is an ongoing process. It entails engaging one another in candid feedback exchanges meant to provoke personal insight and behavior change. The team decided to devote an hour of its bi-monthly meeting to “perception exchanges.” These were not hot-tub sensitivity sessions but an opportunity to test progress and confront disconnects.

PERCEPTION EXCHANGES

Among the questions raised were the following:

- ▶ How do I think I’ve been viewed and how do I want to be viewed?
- ▶ What did I do vis-a-vis the team that may have gotten in the way of high performance?
- ▶ What must I do going forward to add greater value?
- ▶ Whom on the team must I connect with to address an issue or strengthen a relationship?

Feedback is quick and specific. Posturing is not treated kindly. The attitude is, “Let’s be brutally candid, yet supportive.”

END NOTE

In acquiring the ability to effectively manage conflict, the healthcare team became a leadership team in fact, not just in title. A new general manager has yet to be appointed, but it isn’t a pressing issue. The team is successfully running the business and actually having fun in the process. If a general manager is brought in from the outside, the team possesses the confidence and capability to integrate the new leader into the conflict-management process, thereby accelerating his or her learning and performance. And the leader will inherit a team that is singularly focused on winning competitive battles in the marketplace, rather than on internal skirmishes. It has moved from alignment to high performance. [MW](#)

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