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*CONFLICT IS NOT
A DIRTY WORD*

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Conflict Is Not A DIRTY WORD

Submitted by Ken Lloyd

It happens every day, in every home, in every workplace and in every business. Even such altruistic groups as Churches, Congregations and Voluntary groups are not immune. It's everywhere. It can creep into a small office as effectively as it can explode inside a large consortium. A conflict can sit ignored like a dead elephant in the middle of the Boardroom as easily as it can fester in the mailroom. It can erode relationships, drive talented workers out of your company and create barriers to developing creativity that can break any marketing team. Yet without conflict there are no new ideas, no development, no improvement and no evolution. If it's so pervasive, natural and beneficial, why is it so potentially destructive, unpleasant and painful?

Conflict can be destructive because like a virus that mutates to match the host, conflict evolves to fit each relationship and organization. It can become so much a part of the way we do business that it becomes routine. We can try to ignore it, "she's always like that;" we can say its a personality clash, "those two never get on together;" or we can blame another group, "Well, what do you expect from that lot." It is the way we manage conflict as an individual and as an organization that decides whether the conflict evolves into a positive change or a destructive dispute.

How to manage conflict and make use of all the energy and emotion it can create? Happily many businesses have a fully integrated conflict management system where conflicts are dealt with early in an open and trusted manner. Some conflicts whether in business or in the home, can still slip through get buried and emerge four or five years later in an outburst of emotion that can leave us standing in stunned silence. Conflict is everywhere and it must be dealt with the earlier the better. So how to turn it into a positive experience?

First, take a deep breath and think beyond what you see in front of you. If this were an unexploded bomb ticking away, you wouldn't rush blindly in. Same with a person or group in con-

If this were an unexploded bomb ticking away, you wouldn't rush blindly in. Same with a person or group in conflict, look beyond their anger and your own quick judgement of whose fault it is. Listen and assess what is happening until you can make some sense out of the conflict.

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Conflict ... continued from previous page

flict, look beyond their anger and your own quick judgement of whose fault it is. Listen and assess what is happening until you can make some sense out of the conflict.

Second, take a guess at what the conflict is all about. Don't make any judgements about whose fault it is or how it can be fixed, you probably don't know the whole story yet. Just take a guess as to what the conflict is all about and don't worry about being wrong, they will soon let you know if you are.

Thirdly, having got some sort of feedback as to what the conflict is all about, now decide what you are going to do and get on with it. Look, listen, assess and act. Do not raise false hopes or start processes without following through all the way. The first casualty in any conflict is the mutual loss of trust in the intentions of the other individual or group. Trust is built on a succession of events over time where an expected result has happened. When an expected result fails to happen mutual trust is eroded.

In conflict, the acknowledgement of emotion is a very real factor in producing a positive result. For the manager a conflict will rarely be handled in total isolation or so dominant that it has the complete focus of the organization on its issues. More normally, the conflict is running in the background like feedback through a set of speakers. Always there creating noise

while we get on with doing business. Sometimes this noise creates self-doubt for the leader, particularly if the conflict centres on the ability to manage. So, acknowledge and set aside the emotional and psychological impact; the need to win, and the need to be seen to have been right. We are now free to focus on a sense of self worth and use the attributes and training gained in the managerial position.

If I had to choose the key factor for changing conflict into a growth opportunity it would be the exercise of objectivity. It requires objectivity not to judge the conflict; it requires objectivity not to blame the other parties and objectivity to recognize our own role in the conflict. Above all, objectivity aids our ability to listen to the other person's view and rebuild trust that is the first casualty in any dispute. ✍



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