**Office Conflict? How to Navigate Difficult Conversations as a Leader**

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What is your personal comfort level with conflict at the office ? Do you make concessions to avoid it at all costs, only to be annoyed with yourself later? Or, perhaps, does conflict unwittingly bring out your inner-prize-fighter and seduce you into losing your temper?

Each one of us has a different relationship with conflict. All of us have unique and highly personal experiences with conflict in the workplace. Those experiences can vary greatly, depending on the situation, the participants involved, the topic at issue, what the stakes are, one’s temperament, our past experiences with conflict, and even… what day of the week it is ( just to name a few ).

However, the reality is, conflict is part of our daily lives, especially at work. And leaders are no exception.

As a leadership psychologist and organisational coach, I examine, deconstruct, reset, and mediate conflict with leaders on a regular basis. When I am invited to assist on those mandates, I have a few ground-rules for navigating the choppy waters of conflict.

Here are some key conflict resolution strategies when leaders find themselves involved in, or managing, office conflict.

First, I want to acknowledge that, apart from truly immature and problematic outbursts, conflict can be a catalyst for positive growth. Adding tools to your conflict tool-box to navigate these difficult conversations can have, almost magical, impacts.

Second, I am going to let you in on a secret. At the root of most (not all) conflict lies the shared human experience that people want to truly feel heard, seen, and understood. These are basic, and understandable, human needs. Ensuring that needs are met is a great starting place for positive communication.

Third, know thyself is crucial to effective conflict resolution. Understanding how you personally show-up in conflict matters as much to the outcome as the other person’s behaviour.  Why ? It is because conflict does not happen as a one-sided experience, it takes at least two parties to tango, and the more you become aware of how you personally show-up in conflict, the more you will be able navigate the other party in the dispute. This is where psychological comes into play.

Fourth, conflict is all around and to be expected. Simply by turning on the evening news we are bombarded with conflict. At work, whether it’s prepping for a difficult feedback session, mediating team members, communicating with a colleague or dealing with a upset chairman…conflict is ubiquitous. Not to mention conflict within families.

Fifth, even though conflict is uncomfortable, slowing the process down to ensure everything is surfaced and not rushing the process so that everyone feels better in the short-term. Being constructive with conflict does not mean hurrying to find a quick resolve to bring temporary peace. Conflict has roots, and if they are not dealt with thoroughly, it will grow again under the right climate.  This includes time for people to decompress during the process.

Sixth, don’t be afraid of conflict; not all of it is bad. In fact, intentionally reframing conflict as a starting point for  a healthier relationship and a more productive standard of communication, which can fuel increased psychological safety.

Seventh, take precautions. If mishandled, conflict can be detrimental to working relationships, so be sure to have the process mapped out, and some difficult conversations skills ready to go or consult a mediator and/or organisational psychologist for assistance. On this note though, set the tone from the outset of assuming positive intent. Most people don’t want to stay in conflict, so helping them to find a way out of conflict as a leader can be liberating.

Eighth, if things get off-track, seek a 3rd party’s help to mediate if needed. That can help to respectfully bring the issues to the table in an honest, yet cautious way.

And finally, empathetic and active listening is the key skill in de-escalation, mediation and resolution. Listen-Up. Learn techniques in active listening, and engage with an ability to hear emotions, hear facts, and help the other to feel heard and understood.

Becoming more attuned to your personal tolerance levels, tendencies and listening styles during conflict is key.  Acknowledging your accountability as part of the solution is also key. Empower yourself with self-knowledge. Know where your conflict edges lie, and level-up your active listening skills.  Warning: buckle-up, because conflict and difficult conversations take courage, self-learning and vulnerability.

Working as part of an organization is similar to the dynamics of an extended family because it brings people together under shared tasks and interests, and it forces us to work together. Therefore, finding a way to make the relationship work as constructively as possible is vital. Respectful and honest communication is the only way, and navigating difficult conversations productively is the path.

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