

5 Benefits of Workplace Conflict

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It may seem like an oxymoron to have the words “benefit” and “conflict” in the same sentence. Our workplaces today often involve varying levels of interpersonal and institutional conflict and so much energy is devoted to prevention and management it is understandably difficult to understand how conflict could possibly have a positive side!

It helps to remember that conflict (including disagreement, difference of opinion, concern, complaint, friction, etc.) is not inherently good or bad.¹ It is an inevitable result of human beings associating with each other in the world, in our families and in our workplaces. There are many articles and blog posts trumpeting the “benefits of conflict” but, on reflection, this phrase is much too simplistic. It is not the conflict that directly creates benefits, it is dealing with the conflict well.² The key to unlocking the benefits of conflict is learning to engage effectively with conflict when it arises.

I have learned much about conflict and conflict engagement from Bernie Mayer. In his Queen's IRC article [The Paradox of Leadership: Cooperating to Compete, Following to Lead](#)³, he emphasizes that how we “set the stage for the effective use of conflict and how we respond to conflict is critical to our effectiveness as leaders”. This is a leadership competency and these skills are becoming more and more in demand. We can't deny, avoid or prevent all conflict. So what can we, as leaders, do? Bernie suggests what to some may be a revolutionary concept:

The more important challenge is to create the space for conflict to occur in a constructive way for people to raise difficult and contentious issues, and for leaders to be exposed to often uncomfortable disagreements. Otherwise, problems fester, important views are squelched and effective communication is inhibited.

So there are good reasons NOT to allow conflict to fester, but what are the potential positive benefits that could flow from providing such a safe space for conflict to occur?

My research and experience has revealed many benefits from engaging well with conflict. Five of the most important benefits which relate to workplace conflict are:

1. Earlier Problem Identification

Workplace conflict can shine a light on deeper problems that need to be addressed. Even the most seemingly trivial disagreements might stem from underlying unaddressed issues that, if not addressed, are likely to fester and then explode down the road. Thoughtful managers can watch for patterns in the workplace and engage early with the involved staff before the workplace is disrupted by a full-fledged conflict.

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Similarly, conflict can identify practices and processes that need to be improved or replaced.

2. Better Problem-Solving

The best ideas and solutions flow from healthy discussions involving a diversity of perspectives.⁴ But this goal can be difficult to attain. It is challenging when our work colleagues disagree with our opinions or suggestions. Different viewpoints can sometimes result in friction or even outright conflict. Sometimes one or two voices tend to dominate discussions in the workplace leaving others without real opportunities to express their views at all. These dynamics can lead to disengagement, poor buy-in and less than optimal solutions.

If staff members can learn to engage with these kinds of conflicts in constructive ways, then disagreements are not only normalized but can be seen to be an important piece of joint problem-solving. If everyone feels comfortable expressing their views, more ideas are generated and differences of opinion become opportunities to hone and improve ideas into workable solutions. These are critical life skills which can be applied in the workplace and beyond. In addition, conflict engagement is an important leadership skill and employees who seek training and experience in this area may have better chances for advancement within the organization.

3. Healthy Relationships, Morale and Commitment

Conflict that is denied, avoided, suppressed or handled ineffectively can harm relationships. Human beings can form inaccurate assumptions about the intentions of others which, unless surfaced and examined, can undermine important working relationships. On the other hand, if staff feel comfortable raising differing views, concerns or complaints and they see that these are heard and respected by their peers and management then their relationships with each other and with the organization can be strengthened.

In one organization I was involved in, some members of a critical stakeholder group felt disenfranchised by a decision made by the organization that they argued didn't take that group's interests into account. While initially denying their concerns and escalating the conflict, the organization was able to pivot by expressing willingness to participate in an open dialogue about the issues. Three well-facilitated circle processes were held and were well attended. Participants reported that they felt their concerns were heard and respected. The organization benefited from the healthy dialogue and relationships were strengthened.

4. Improved Productivity

There will likely be an investment of time and energy at the outset to prepare individuals and teams to recognize and engage well with various kinds of workplace conflict. However, conflict that is handled well will free up people to focus on their jobs rather than tensions in the office which will lead to higher productivity, efficiency and effectiveness.

The most successful teams involve a diversity of backgrounds and approaches. By virtue of their training and experience, many lawyers are "black hat thinkers" who tend to focus on risk and possible negative outcomes. When we are trying to change things or encourage innovation and creativity this approach can be annoying. Some team members may dislike

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having their ideas challenged in this way, which can cause discord. However, a well-functioning team with training in effective conflict engagement can benefit from rigorous black hat and other types of thinking in order to hone and improve its ideas.

5. Personal Growth and Insight

Conflictual situations can help us to learn more about ourselves and others. There is nothing like a difficult disagreement to reveal not only what we care about, but also our default approaches and reactions. We may not always show up as our “best selves” when in the midst of a heated discussion or when confronted by stinging criticism. However, in each of these situations, if we are open to it, then there is likely to be an important insight about ourselves that is worthy of learning. Self-awareness is the first step to managing ourselves better in the future.

We can learn about our work colleagues in the midst of conflict. It may be helpful to know, in advance, how they react in certain situations and to take that information into account when we are working with them in the future.

If I look back on my life so far, I realize that much of my greatest learning came not from those moments of peace and tranquility (although they were lovely!) but from experiences of conflict with others, including colleagues in the workplace. By reflecting on those experiences I have realized that my personality (or perhaps my legal training) led me to be defensive and unaware of my many blind spots. Self-awareness then led me to a determination to unlearn some responses and to nurture other (more healthy) approaches. I am still a work in process but I am grateful for those difficult conflictual experiences.

Conflict is hard. Imagine rather than expending our energy and time avoiding or “preventing” conflict, you, your team or your organization could welcome conflict, knowing that you have the tools and skills to harness multiple benefits from engaging with conflict well. The good news is that these skills can be learned and, if you haven’t already done so, I encourage you to seek out training to support your efforts. You will not be sorry.

Footnotes

¹ With the exception of conflict resulting from behaviour which is violent or abusive.

² The opposite is also true: conflict can be harmful if it is not dealt with effectively. “Dealing well with conflict” will look different in each situation. Sometimes it means helping the parties to reach a full resolution; sometimes it is necessary to escalate a conflict in order to make important social change. A boycott, protest or strike is an example of this dynamic.

³ Mayer, B. (2016). *The Paradox of Leadership: Cooperating to Compete, Following to Lead*. Queen’s University IRC. Retrieved November 15, 2017 from <http://irc.queensu.ca/articles/paradox-leadership-cooperating-compete-following-lead>.

⁴ Rock, D. & Grant, H. (2016, November 4). *Why Diverse Teams are Smarter*. *Harvard Business Review*. Retrieved November 15, 2017, from <https://hbr.org/2016/11/why-diverse-teams-are-smarter>.

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