

# Six simple shifts to tackle the bad kind of conflict on your team

by Coach Pdraig

In our last post, we talked about building good conflict on your team. That is, fostering conflict around ideas so that you, your team, your organization are making the best decisions possible and everyone leaves the room committed.

They're committed to the decision, even if it wasn't their preferred direction, because they know they've been heard, their ideas and concerns have been considered, and they trust that the person making the decision has the best interests of the team and the organization at heart.

**So, what about that other kind of conflict — the nasty, interpersonal conflict between people? This is the kind of conflict that gives “conflict” a bad rap.**

The reason so many teams avoid good conflict around ideas is because of their experiences with the bad kind of conflict. It's insidious, it's damaging, yet often we ignore it hoping it will go away.

What do you do when you're in conflict like this with someone at work?

Or, when two of your staff or teammates have this kind of interpersonal conflict? What do you do to help? **We've got a few suggestions:**

## **Shift Forward**

When we're in conflict with someone on a personal level, it's because of the past — something that happened, something we resent, something we're carrying with us. Perhaps it's happened more than once; perhaps we feel very justified.

That may be but so long as we live in the past with this person, we are doomed to the same cycle. Shift instead to thinking about what you could change going forward and talking about the future desire, not the past frustration.

## **Drop the But**

We've all been there, we've all done it — we're having a conversation peppered with “yah, but...”. We're not acknowledging the other person with the “yah” part of that, we're disagreeing with them with the “but” part. Try “and” instead.

Switch from “I understand your point, BUT...” to: “I understand your point, AND...”

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## **Listen to Understand**

You've heard it from me before, but overcoming personal conflict often means listening to understand. While this suggestion is helpful for all kinds of conflict around ideas (including the good kind), it's especially useful to try to understand what's motivating personal conflict.

One of the great challenges for all relationships, and work relationships are no different, is to understand what's motivating the other person — what frustrates them, what excites them, what bothers them.

The challenge, of course, is that what affects others in those ways may well affect you in different ways. Listening to understand helps you figure it out and see the world a little more clearly from their perspective.

## **Acknowledge their Perspective**

Having heard and hopefully understood their perspective — let them know. Take the time to acknowledge what you've heard. Remember, acknowledging doesn't have to mean agreeing, but it shows you're listening, it shows you're trying to understand. Try something like, "It sounds like you are feeling \_\_\_\_\_," or "I can see how this situation would be \_\_\_\_\_" (i.e., "upsetting," "frustrating," etc.).

## **Apologize Appropriately**

Apologizing helps to create a safer environment, it shows you're willing to be vulnerable and it acknowledges something you might redo, if you could. Ideally you are apologizing for your words or your actions, not the other person's feelings. And, you're expressing your own emotions without blame. Try hard to not include a "but" in your apology.

## **Be Aware**

"Be aware" could be a mantra for leadership. Be aware of how you are feeling. Be aware of how the other person is responding. That awareness is the beginning of emotional intelligence and it's built firmly on being mindful. I could dive into a whole blog on mindfulness, and probably will one day soon, but for now ask yourself things like, "Why isn't this working," "How am I feeling right now, and why," and "How might I be contributing to this?"

## **COACH'S QUESTIONS**

Who are you in conflict with and how is it affecting your work, or the work of your team? How might you improve the relationship? What holds you back from making the first move?

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