

Resolving negative emotions at work

How do we effectively deal with conflict? The Global Human Capital Report (2008) suggests that 75 percent struggle with conflict and people surveyed are spending on average over two hours per week on conflict at work. This time is directly impacting peoples' well-being and productivity.

Negative emotions and their impact

In a conflict, one or more people have negative emotions which often lead to the following unproductive behaviours.

1. Avoidance/withdrawal - no or minimal communication between the parties
2. Confrontation - the parties constantly try to win each other over
3. Positioning - the parties overtly or covertly discredit each other.

Detecting early signs of a conflict is important as negative emotions grow like cancer. An earlier intervention is easier and has a higher chance of success. Negative emotions and thoughts trigger behaviours which are causing stress or even physical and mental illness for those involved, including the bystanders. Unfortunately, some people are spending weeks and months in this unhealthy space often followed by their resignation, breakdown or formal complaint. When the well-being of people suffers, the company suffers as a result.

The connection between conflict and opportunity

People can perceive and experience one and the same situation very differently. A healthy debate for one person can be experienced by another person as an emotionally draining conflict. People

think, feel and react in different ways. While this diversity in people can be a valuable asset in the workplace, diversity can at the same time be a source of conflict. The saying no gain without (the risk of) pain rings true here. Working with people can lead to opportunities as well as conflicts. Attempts to leverage from the diversity of people through leadership and culture change initiatives should therefore focus on maximising the opportunities while minimising conflicts as shown in the figure below.

Organisations have diverse people to varying degrees as no person is the same. Opportunities arise when people with diverse thoughts and skills understand how to acknowledge and use their individual differences for the greater good of the team or organisation. On the flipside, conflicts emerge when people cannot see the value of each other and when they struggle to make people feel acknowledged and listened to. In those instances, negative emotions emerge and turn opportunities into conflicts. A combination of maximising opportunities (gains) with minimising conflicts (pains) makes working with diverse people successful. In summary, opposing differences between people are opportunities. A conflict only arises when at least one person experiences negative emotions. Resolving negative emotions is critical to make people engaged and productive.

Emotions and engagement

Emotions, good and bad, are with us all the time in various intensities. We can moderate our emotions but we cannot leave them at the gate when we go to work, although

generations of managers have been trained to do exactly that. How can we help people to stay positive if this is enabling them to be more productive, constructive, resilient and tolerant? Anyone can slip into a conflict. We can learn though how to prevent most of them and we can practice how to resolve a conflict quickly.

“ *A combination of maximising opportunities with minimising conflicts makes working with diverse people successful* ”

Verbalising emotions

Mathew Lieberman found in his experiments that putting emotions into words dramatically reduced the levels of stress in individuals. Lieberman suggests that the technique of labelling emotions disrupts the primitive part of our brain which is geared to switch on an automated response like flight or fight. When negative emotions are verbalised they are less likely to trigger unhelpful behaviours.

Conversations about negative emotions are best accompanied by empathy and respect to ensure the words used are not emotionally loaded or hurtful. People shy away from exploring with another person where their negative emotions come from partly because they fear hearing unpleasant things about themselves. However, addressing negative emotions instead of dancing around the elephant in the room is a very powerful way forward for people who need to work together in future. Figure 1 is an exempt from The Resolving Differences Model©, developed by the Institute for Diversity. Instead of applying a self-centred view the model suggests to understand the other person before we are trying to be understood.

How to resolve conflict

Talking about negative feelings does not mean that we are blaring out how hurt we feel. It does not mean that we are adopting



Acting on emotions

Figure 1: Exempt of The Resolving Differences Model©

Understand your own and the other persons emotions	Talk about what made you feel that way	Accept responsibility for your part	Apply shared values to find common ground
What made me/the other person upset? Why? Listen with empathy	Reflect together on how you interacted When you said... it made me feel...	<i>Instead of... I should have... I am sorry that I made you feel that way...</i>	<i>We both have a high sense of integrity... We both want the best outcome for our customer...</i>

the role of a counsellor either. Addressing negative feelings is about having the courage and maturity to genuinely listen to a person, show empathy, acknowledge our mistakes, how we might have contributed to the conflict, and share how we feel and why. Just to clarify for those who think talking about feelings is for softies and has nothing to do with the realities of business; these conversations are amongst the most difficult to have because people cannot hide behind position power, rules or policies. Business is made between people and this is a stripped down person to person conversation. Of course there will be many different nuances of those conversations, depending on the situation. Fact is that people who are angry with each other won't be able to effectively collaborate and they won't be able to find the best solutions. While emotions can

mellow out over time, the damage in terms of the impact on health and productivity has already been done.

Application in practice

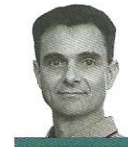
I share an example from my leadership coaching practice. A team leader said that she struggles to get a team member to update their system with file notes which was important for the organisation. She tried everything in the managers' rule book but nothing really worked. They were hardly greeting each other in the morning at that stage and their perceptions of each other were heavily filtered. 'The team leader is picking on me.' 'The team member is slack'.

I asked the team leader how she feels about this situation. After a pause to think she said that she was quite frustrated,

even angry and that she was losing sleep over it. Then I asked how she thinks her team member feels about the situation. We started to work on how they both can have a conversation about their feelings.

Talking about feelings makes people human. Team leaders have feelings too and when they share them they show humility and become more approachable as a person. In this example, the team member started to enter the file notes because she did not want to let the person down (who happens to her team leader), the person with whom she has now a personal and emotional connection. Their relationship improved almost overnight.

Addressing negative emotions and talking about feelings deepens relationships. People who can connect on a personal and emotional level contribute to their own and other people's well-being as well as to a healthy bottom line of their organisation. *References available on request. HR*



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