



RESOLVING NEGATIVE EMOTIONS AT WORK

Conflict only arises when at least one person experiences negative emotions, says Stefan Doll. Addressing these emotions by talking about them is the best approach for the individual and the organisation.

How do we effectively deal with conflict? The *Global Human Capital Report* (2008) suggests that 75 percent of people struggle with conflict and those surveyed are spending on average over two hours per week on conflict at work. This time is having a direct impact on peoples' wellbeing and productivity.

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. David Rock (*Quiet Leadership*) says negative

emotions and thoughts trigger behaviours which cause stress or even physical and mental illness for those involved, including the bystanders. Unfortunately, some people spend weeks and months in this unhealthy space, often followed by their resignation, a breakdown or a formal complaint. When the wellbeing of people suffers, the company suffers as a result.

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, it 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 Figure 1.

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, enabling them to be more productive, constructive, resilient and tolerant? Anyone can slip into a conflict, but we can learn how to prevent most such situations and we can practise how to resolve conflict quickly.

Psychologist Matthew 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 2 is an excerpt from the Resolving Differences Model developed by the Institute for Diversity. Instead of applying a self-centred view, the model suggests we understand the other person before we try to be understood.

HOW TO RESOLVE CONFLICT

Talking about negative feelings does not mean that we blurt out how hurt we feel. It does not mean that we adopt 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.

For those who think talking about feelings is for softies and has nothing to

FIGURE 1. OPPORTUNITIES AND CONFLICTS



FIGURE 2. ACTING ON EMOTIONS



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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.

Of course, there will be many different nuances of these conversations, depending on the situation. The fact is that people who are angry with each other aren't 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.

Here's an example from my leadership coaching practice. A team leader said she struggles to get one of her team to update their system with file notes, which are important for the organisation. She's tried everything in the managers' rule book, but nothing has worked. They were hardly greeting each other in the morning 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 felt 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 thought her team member felt 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 down her team leader—a person she now has a personal and emotional connection with. 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 wellbeing as well as to a healthy bottom line of their organisation.



STEFAN DOLL is founder and principal consultant at the New Zealand Institute for Diversity & Wellbeing (www.diversityinstitute.co.nz).