

Why Does Everyone Hate Conflict?

By Jamie Notter

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Everyone hates conflict. Conflict is the problem. We'd be getting so much more done in this organization if we weren't mired in conflict. That conflict I have with [fill in the blank] is really frustrating.

Does this sound familiar? I encounter it often in organizations. But is conflict really the problem? Maybe conflict is getting a bad rap. I started my career in the relatively new field of conflict resolution. We studied conflict, probed it, analyzed it, picked it apart, and we learned one thing: it is everywhere. In fact, it is natural. You cannot have life (or organizations) without it.

So conflict in itself is not the problem, but what is? The field of conflict resolution says *the way we deal with conflict* is actually the problem. If we could just use better communication skills, better negotiation skills, and treat each other better, we would transform our conflicts routinely into win-win situations. Same conflicts, better results. Throughout my career I have provided training in conflict resolution skills based on these conclusions.

But I found that better conflict resolution skills did not always eliminate the conflicts or problems in organizations. The skills helped in some cases; they are, in fact, useful skills to have. Yet there were still situations where even though leaders, managers, and employees knew the skills, they just would not use them. In those conflict situations, despite elevated skill levels, they still had a problem.

So the problem is not conflict, and it is not even the way we deal with conflict. Quite simply, the problem is that people stop. They don't act. They are faced with an opportunity to move into a difficult place (filled with both risk and reward), but they choose to hold back, even though holding back ultimately brings them results they do not want. Why do they hold back? When I actually work with a leader or a team to figure that out, I find that the reasons are all over the map. They didn't want to hurt people's feelings. They felt it was none of their business. They felt it would work itself out eventually. They assumed someone

else would not want them to act. They never knew others were waiting for them to act. The list goes on. Most importantly, they did not see that their failure to do something about the conflict would bring them the results they were hoping to avoid.

The challenge is to help those leaders and teams to identify and remove the barriers that are keeping them from acting and resolving their conflicts. This requires an important shift, because as the saying goes, if you do what you always did, you get what you always got. Leaders and teams sometimes need to stop, take a step back, and change the nature and tone of their conversations. Instead of business as usual, the team should spend some time actively examining their conflicts and the impact they are having. This often happens at off-site retreats, but it is much more effective if it can be built into everyday operations as well. The good news is, conflict resolution skills are useful to that process. Being able to communicate well, listen, ask thoughtful questions, and check out your own and others' assumptions will all help teams break through the barriers and move into effective action. The key here is in the strategic application of those skills. You don't just use or practice the skills because they are generically good. You apply the skills to a process that will get you results.

So the next time you find yourself grumbling about conflict in your organization, take a step back. Conflict is not the problem. Maybe you do not have the skills to manage conflict effectively, in which case, there are opportunities to build those skills. And maybe you have the skills, but you are holding back anyway. In that case, you need to apply those skills to yourself, your division, or your team to identify and remove those barriers to effective action. Once you see the results of that effective action, you may come to see conflict in a more favorable light.