



Is Conflict Propelling Your Team Forward or **Holding it Back?**

BY:

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IS CONFLICT PROPELLING YOUR TEAM FORWARD OR HOLDING IT BACK?

In 2014, though my business was enjoying a growth spurt, I was frustrated. My intention for our team was that we would all work together to propel us forward. To support that aim, I had invested a lot of time and money in a leadership development program for our team. But despite all my efforts, I knew I wasn't getting the best efforts of my people. I was still the person initiating and executing most of our growth initiatives.

I couldn't figure out why the team wasn't clicking--until the day one of my most talented team members resigned. During her exit interview, I said, "Give it to me straight. Tell me why you're really leaving." I wasn't prepared for what she told me. "All of this talk about how we are all leaders is nice," she said, "but at the end of the day it's always going to be 'Do what Saša says.'" That's when I realized what the problem was: It was me. I had done a great job of creating what my coach and colleague Ray Kelly calls a "control culture," in which the boss perpetuates destructive conflict by driving it underground. I was sending mixed signals. I was micromanaging just about every element of the business. I wasn't receptive to team members' ideas unless they mirrored my own. So, there was a lot of conflict in our team. I just didn't notice it.

THAT'S WHEN I REALIZED WHAT THE PROBLEM WAS: IT WAS ME.

Ray describes two other types of culture that affect how teams manage conflict. At the opposite extreme from the control culture is the appeasement, or approval-based, culture. In an appeasement culture, the leader tries to avoid conflict at any cost by doing what the leader thinks will make everyone happy. Turns out that's not possible. In an appeasement culture, the best team members feel disenfranchised because they get no more recognition than the slackers. In such a culture, a few of your better people will complain about your failure to manage conflict or deal with performance issues. But, as in a control culture, some of your best people will avoid conflict by quietly leaving.

IN CONTROL OR APPEASEMENT CULTURES, SOME OF YOUR BEST PEOPLE WILL AVOID CONFLICT BY QUIETLY LEAVING.

The third type of culture is a vision-based culture. It's the type of culture that I now promote with my team, because it's the only type of culture in which elite teams thrive. In a vision-based culture, my role as a leader is to define our destination, not to give step by step directions about how to get there. Team members are empowered to work together to accomplish our mission. In such a culture, different opinions are celebrated, and conflict is not merely tolerated, but embraced.



Productive conflict is essential to a vision-based culture, and to internalize productive conflict in our team, we have adopted three basic operating principles:

VIEW REALITY LIKE A BEACH BALL

Leadership development expert Susan Scott uses the metaphor of a multicolored beach ball to explain the impact of team members' differing versions of reality.¹ In Scott's model, each team member stands on their own colored stripe of the beach ball, meaning each sees the world from their own unique perspective. When challenges arise, one team member may interpret the situation from their blue perch, while another sees the situation from their red stripe. But in fact, no one's color is better than another's. No one's truth is truer than another's. As a founder, it's sometimes tempting to feel that the weight of our organization's success rests solely on my shoulders. But as a leader I've learned to shake off that burden and remind myself that I am not alone on that beach ball.



Photo by Ed Robertson on Unsplash

BE RADICALLY OPEN-MINDED

Elite teams don't just accept the reality of others' different perspectives. They're smart enough to understand that those varied points of view are assets. If every team member has a valuable piece of the truth, then radical open-mindedness is the only productive response to others' views. Being radically open-minded means not only that you accept others' perspectives, but actively encourage everyone to bring their ideas to the table.

¹Susan Scott. Fierce Conversations. Crown Business. September 15, 2009.

BE RADICALLY ASSERTIVE.

Being radically assertive takes the principle of radical open-mindedness up a level. Not only are you open to others' ideas, but you take ownership for working with other team members to tackle problems and develop new ways of fulfilling your organization's purpose. Being radically assertive includes embracing conflict. Embracing conflict is about being free to give feedback to anyone. Anyone at any level. About anything. That's the essence of productive conflict, which is essential to generating fresh ideas, building trusting relationships and delivering a superior client experience.



Today, our practice is a team of many colors.

Together we've come a long way, from avoiding conflict to insisting on it. **We've built rituals that help us embrace conflict every day.** We know we can't grow without conflict, and I know we'll only be ready for a generational transition when the next generation has mastered the art of conflict.



Contact Saša Mirković at Inspire Network to learn more about strategies for creating transformational growth or positioning your business for a successful generational transition.

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