

Managing Conflict Constructively

THE REWARDS of managing disagreement well are substantial. Skillfully handling differences boosts productivity, reduces stress, sparks creativity, enhances working relationships, opens career paths, benefits workplace diversity, and builds commitment to a shared vision.

Managed poorly, differences such as diverse backgrounds and conflicting ideas are a potential source of bickering, diverted energy, and bruised feelings. Without solid conflict management skills, team building, for example, can backfire into destructive rivalry and undermined morale.

This month's "Training 101" presents basic conceptual tools for managing disagreement constructively; practice, of course, helps hone these tools.

TOOLS FOR MANAGING DISAGREEMENT

BY HERBERT S. KINDLER

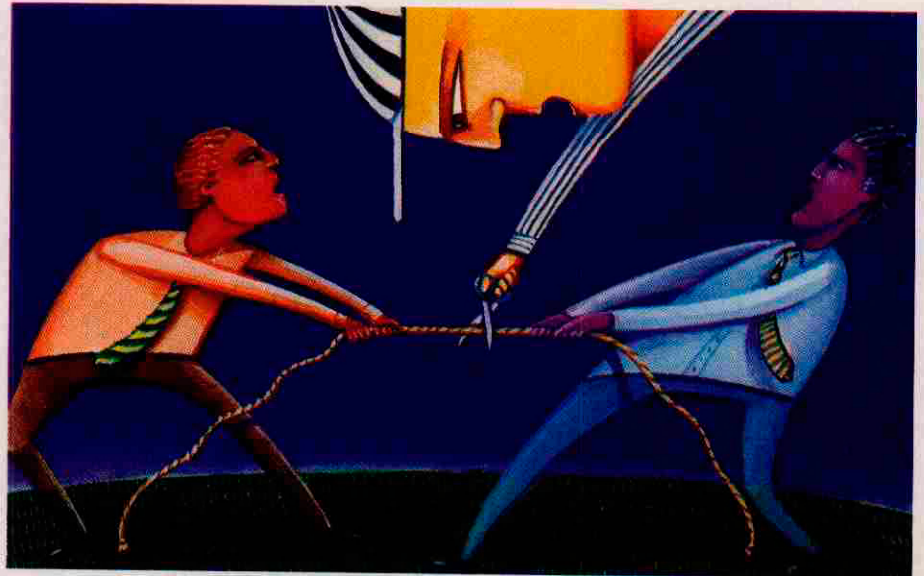
THERE ARE THREE AREAS to learn and practice if you want to improve your batting average in dealing with disagreement and conflict: knowing the guiding principles, selecting from a comprehensive repertoire of strategic approaches, and practicing a systematic process.

◆ *Value diverse views.* Alternative views are the ore fields of rich ideas and creative possibilities. Invite and encourage their expression.

◆ *Communicate with respect and empathy.* Listen for what is being said—and not being said. Ask yourself, "How can I discuss our differences in ways that are respectful, so that the other person doesn't leave feeling put down?"

Nine strategic approaches. The information in the accompanying figure was developed in a research study on how managers skilled in conflict management resolve differences. It is based on managers' behavior rather than their attitudes about cooperation, competition, concern for self, or concern for others.

Unlike the five-mode model, introduced in the 1960s and '70s by Blake



& Mouton and Thomas & Kilmann, this study's conclusion was that nine approaches to conflict resolution are useful. Just as golfers play best with a full set of clubs, you can handle the sand traps of disagreement more effectively with a wider range of strategic options.

To understand actual behavior, people in the research study were asked: "When your views on a work-related issue differ from the views of others who are also involved, how do you prepare for such situations?" During the interviews, two behaviors emerged as themes: choosing how firm or flexible to be when asserting one's viewpoint and choosing how personally involved to be when others hold divergent views. After these two dimensions—viewpoint flexibility and interaction intensity—were identified, a literature study revealed the following nine strategies for managing disagreement.

◆ *Maintain.* Continue the status quo by avoiding or delaying action on views that differ from your own. As an interim strategy, this is useful when you need time to collect information, let emotions cool, enlist allies, deal with higher priorities, allow recent changes to stabilize, or let circumstances resolve the issue (such as the imminent retirement of an intransigent person).

◆ *Smooth.* Sell your views by accentuating data that supports the benefits of accepting them, while glossing over or omitting alternatives that would fuel opposition. Consider this form of persuasion when a decision is needed and time isn't available for full-scale discussion, or the other person lacks maturity or experience to appreciate the whole picture.

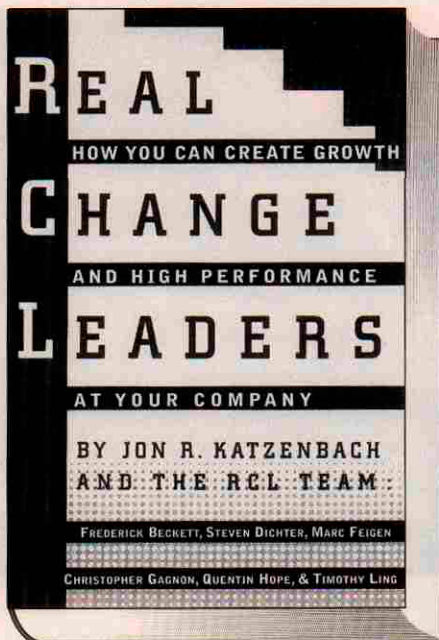
◆ *Dominat*e. Use directives, rewards, punishments, or whatever pressure will gain compliance with your views. Useful when speed is vital to human safety, when confidentiality precludes divulging relevant information, when consequences are too minor to warrant time-consuming involvement of others, or after other approaches have resulted in a stalemate.

◆ *Decide by rule.* Joint agreement to use an objective rule or criterion (such as majority rule, lottery, seniority system, *Robert's Rules of Order*, test score, or arbitration) as the basis for choosing among specified alternatives. Helpful when any alternative under consideration is better or less costly than inaction. Effective when you want to be seen as impartial and when decisive action is needed.

◆ *Coexist.* Joint determination to follow separate paths for a mutually-agreed-upon period, a means to monitor the coexistence agreement, and—where feasible—an agreement

NATIONAL BESTSELLER

The Make-or-Break Factor in Business Today Is Not *Just* Top Management



It's a new breed of "folks in the middle"—*Real Change Leaders*—a growing number of managers who are making a big difference in the performance of their colleagues and their companies.

For middle managers, *Real Change Leaders* shows how to assume a new role—one that will enable them to produce at higher levels and enhance as well as keep their jobs.

By McKinsey's
Jon R. Katzenbach,
co-author of the bestselling
The Wisdom of Teams



A Selection of the Newbridge Executive Program and the Money Book Club

Circle No. 198 on Reader Service Card

Training 101

on how to determine which path to follow at the end of the trial period. Use when both parties are adamant about the merit of their positions and a definitive assessment can be made only after additional testing.

► **Bargain.** Offer something the other party wants in exchange for something you want; repeat the offer and counteroffer procedure until one party accepts. Useful when both parties can gain more from a compromise agreement (including future reciprocity or "log rolling") than by not reaching any agreement at all.

► **Yield.** After expressing where your views differ from the other person's, you agree to do what they want. Useful when the issue is minor to you but important to the other person, or when you can gain helpful experience by implementing an unfamiliar course of action.

► **Release.** Encourage the other person to resolve the issue and specify limits or conditions. Use when you are in a position to act as a mentor. That is, apply when the other person is capable but lacks experience or self-assurance. Your aim is to foster initiative and commitment in situations where the cost of failure isn't excessive.

► **Collaborate.** This process requires all participants to state their important desires and concerns so that a responsive resolution can be developed. Attentive listening is required and underlying assumptions must be probed to explore creative possibilities. Useful in gaining commitment, team building, and when the issues are too vital to be compromised. Requires time, interpersonal competence, and trust.

Your challenge is to choose the strategy, or blend, appropriate to each situation. Therefore, it's helpful to determine if you tend to overuse one or two habitual styles and neglect others.

Process for managing disagreement. As important as the guiding principles are and as helpful as a full repertoire of strategies can be, a systematic process for dealing with disagreement is also vital to producing desirable outcomes. Three steps are suggested.

1. **Exploration.** Monitor where differences are simmering so that you can handle the situation before it boils over into overt conflict. These questions can guide your exploration:

TELEPHONE "DOCTOR"™



Improving the performance of people on the phone!™

CUSTOMER SERVICE AND TELEPHONE SKILLS TRAINING PRODUCTS

- COMPLETE 16-MODULE VIDEO TRAINING LIBRARY
- CD-ROMS
- BOOKS & AUDIO CASSETTES
- KEYNOTE PRESENTATIONS

For more information and/or a free preview, please call:



Nancy Friedman
The Telephone "Doctor"™

800-882-9911

Telephone "Doctor"™

30 Hollenberg Ct. • St. Louis, MO 63044
Phone: 314-291-1012 • Fax: 314-291-3710

Circle No. 160 on Reader Service Card

