KEEPING TEAM CONFLICT ALIVE

Conflict can be a good thing.
Here's what you can do to make
the most of this creative force.

By Shari Caudron

Not long ago, Michael Leonetti, director of organization effectiveness atBoehringer Ingelheim, was part of a corporate team created to turn the company's North American operations into a learning organization. The team was made up of organizational development specialists from the company's offices in Canada, the United States, and Mexico. You would think because the team members were all skilled trainers that they'd have similar ideas about how to create a learning-oriented culture, right? Wrong.

As soon as the team was formed, conflicts arose. Within six months, the tension among team members was so great that they were close to giving up. Fortunately, they didn't. As experienced employee-development professionals, they knew that disagreement is a healthy part of the collaborative process. Instead of shying away from the conflict, they wrestled with it head-on until they eventually reached consensus on the best corporate-wide learning strategy. The process didn't always feel good, says Leonetti, but it did work.

His is a lesson that many training professionals can learn from: Instead of trying to stamp out the weeds of conflict, they should do everything they can to nurture them. From the roots of conflict come the fruits of innovation. Ironically, what a lot of trainers do to "manage" conflict may actually push it underground, making it worse. To engender constructive conflict in organizations, trainers themselves must become comfortable with the general idea of conflict and then work to create a culture in which conflict is allowed and acknowledged as a necessary part of the business process.

That's not as far-fetched as it may sound. Conflict is a natural part of the human experience, especially in organizations and especially these days.

According to Alice Pescuric, vice president and practice leader at Development Dimensions International located near Pittsburgh, research shows that line managers now list "managing conflict" as number 7 on their top-10 list of priorities. "It used to be much further down the list," says Pescuric. There are many reasons for that.

In the current highly competitive global marketplace, most employees feel pressured to "do more with less," and they're cracking under the strain. Better-faster-cheaper may be a good goal for companies, but it creates stress for the people who run them. Stress can make people intolerant, which, left unchecked, inevitably leads to conflict. But stress is only part of the reason organizational conflict is escalating. The decentralization of management means that more employees are being asked to make the kind of decisions they never had to make before. Instead of only executives dealing with the tough stuff, most employees now have the responsibility to deal with vexing issues. And that causes conflict.

"The structure of the hierarchy [once protected us] from conflict because employees could stay in their silos and take sides," explains Annette Simmons, author of *Territorial Games* (Amacom Books, 1998). "It wasn't so damaging for engineers to promote their way [or for] marketing to promote its way. But now, employees are having to resolve differences among themselves and that means they get to experience more conflict."

In fact, nothing has contributed more to the es-

calation of conflict than the advent of collaborative, team-based work. The premise is that a lot of people working together can't help but achieve better results than any one person working alone. Though that's often true, the convergence of many different kinds of personalities can create friction unlike any we've seen before. Add to that the inherent conflict in the business environment—quality versus quantity, short-term results versus long-range planning, and so forth—and you begin to see how many employees are living in a pressure cooker in which conflict is constantly simmering. But instead of putting a lid on it, training professionals should find a way for employees to let off steam. Says Pescuric, "Conflict is healthy, even though it does raise angst and anxiety."

It's a good thing

By now, you may be thinking about all of the conflicts you've been involved in, and you're perhaps wondering how on Earth they could be perceived as "healthy." And, how could something that feels so terrible and makes you so angry be good for the organization? Because when you allow conflict, you let employees be themselves.

Says David Stiebel, author of *When Talking Makes Things Worse!* (Whitehall & Nolton, 1997), "Employees are smart enough to know what managers want and, in most cases, what they want is conformity and obedience." Stiebel believes that when employees think conflict is a no-no, they won't voice their objections, concerns, or dissenting opinions—or suggest new ways of doing things.

"In that kind of environment," says Fred Cunningham, senior EOD specialist at Keane, an information technology firm based in Boston, "we can agree our way into horrendous decisions." But when people are allowed to express their opinions, no matter how disagreeable, magic can occur. More ideas are put on the table, which can lead to more discovery, which can lead to quantum leaps in improvement and innovation. Put simply, conflict is a potent source of creativity—especially in troubled times. After all, if everything is going smoothly, there's no need to innovate or move to a higher level. Says Simmons, "When marketing and engineering disagree violently about something, you've got a wonderful opportunity to figure out how

to make improvements by meeting both [of their] objectives."

Jerry Hirshberg, president of Nissan Design International in San Diego, has great respect for the creative value of conflict. In fact, he encourages it on projects by purposely putting together people from different professional and cultural backgrounds. What he's after is something he calls "creative abrasion," which he describes as "the ability to transform pregnant moments of friction and collision into opportunities for breakthroughs."

So, why with all this creative potential is conflict still viewed as something to be avoided or squelched? Two reasons: Because it feels bad and because employees usually are not prepared to deal with it. Typically, they haven't been taught the difference between constructive conflict that leads to innovation and destructive conflict that damages relationships. Without that framework, it's easy to believe all conflict is bad. This is where training professionals come in. Working with upper management, they have a significant role in reframing an organization's concept of conflict. But

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before addressing what trainers can do to nurture constructive conflict, here are some of the things they do that can increase destructive conflict.

It's a bad thing

Ironically, one of the ways that training professionals may (unwittingly) escalate organizational conflict is through the use of traditional conflict management programs. Says Stiebel, "Many trainers have a fundamental belief that conflict is merely the result of poor communication and that, deep down, we are all compatible and share the same interests. I call this 'the myth of hidden harmony.'" Because of that myth, many trainers use conflict management as a way to improve people's communication skills. But by acting as if every conflict is a communication problem, they ignore very real disagreements.

"Better communication about true disagreements can actually increase the conflict around those disagreements," says Stiebel. "That's because, typically, the more we understand someone's position, the more we dislike that person."

Another way that trainers contribute to conflict is through the use of traditional group process. Says Simmons, "Often, many of the facilitation techniques that trainers use push conflict under the surface, making it worse." For example, if a team discussion gets tense, many trainers will divide the team into smaller groups. "That's a way to avoid conflict, not confront it."

Another potentially harmful technique is to try to break an impasse by taking a vote. Simmons points out that "majority rules" is not consensus. Sure, you might get 10 people to agree to go in a certain direction, but you risk having eight people still pissed off. She says, "If people were cows, traditional group process would work because we could corral them through a chute labeled Agreement. But people aren't cows. Whenever we try to herd them in a direction that they don't want to go, they go back to the gate and let themselves out."

The way that many trainers are evaluated may also serve to fuel organizational conflict. "Trainers are trained to be nice because their evaluation sheets typically measure how happy and satisfied employees are with a program," says Simmons. But learning doesn't always feel good, especially when participants are learning about something as inherently uncomfortable as conflict. To help people understand conflict, trainers have to be willing to get them to stare this uncomfortable subject in the face. Says Simmons, "Trainers should forget about being nice and start thinking about being effective."

Granted, it's tricky trying to create the kind of culture in which conflict is nurtured but not allowed get out of hand. There might be a temptation to think: If a little conflict is good, wouldn't a lot be better? The key is to encourage constructive conflict, which leads to better decisions, and discourage destructive conflict, which erupts into turf wars. But how do you distinguish between the two?

"Look at how employees relate to each other in public settings," suggests Jim Lucas, president of Luman Consulting, Shawnee Mission, Kansas. "It's usually the opposite of what is going on under the

surface." Lucas says, for example, that if 10 people in a meeting appear unwilling to disagree, the seeds of destructive conflict are probably at work.

Think about it: How many times have you been in a meeting in which people nodded politely at new ideas but went right back to doing things the same old way? Such behavior indicates the kind of culture in which any conflict or disagreement is considered taboo—the kind of culture that's ripe for destructive, covert conflict. But when people are willing to disagree publicly and challenge each other, you have the makings of constructive conflict. That's because when people are allowed to speak their minds, resentment doesn't have a chance to fester. Disagreements can lead to well-rounded decisions. Says Lucas, "There is no one best way to do anything." Companies that realize that let employees make suggestions no matter how contrary to popular opinion they may be.

Part of the scenery

So how can you, as a training professional, help create the kind of culture in which constructive conflict is encouraged? Recommends Simmons, "Start by getting comfortable with conflict." You can experiment with it and stretch your own comfort zone. Look for apparently unsolvable conflicts. Instead of relegating them to the "unsolvable basket," examine those conflicts more closely for opportunities for creativity.

Simmons recalls a time when she was designing a performance-review system for a client and wanted to involve all managers. The client, however, was used to making all of the decisions and couldn't see how everyone could possibly be involved, especially given the time constraints. She says, "By hashing it out, we were able to create a process that not only heightened organizational performance, but also allowed the managers to feel heard."

Once you're comfortable with conflict, you can begin to influence the kind of organizational change necessary for constructive conflict to become part of the scenery. Conflict isn't something that can be "solved" by teaching employees how to communicate more effectively or work together better in teams—important as those activities are. The best way to deal with conflict is to create the kind of culture in which it's

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acknowledged and supported as a natural part of the business process.

Here are some of the elements that need to be in place for companies to foster the kind of work environment that allows healthy conflict.

Respect individuals and individual differences. Before you can do anything to help employees develop conflict management skills, the organization must create the kind of culture that supports diversity of all kinds, including diversity of thought and opinion. A corporate values statement is a great place to start. At Keane, one of its corporate values is respect for the individual, which implies respect for individual differences. That value goes a long way toward helping employees understand the need to see other points of view. Says Cunningham, "If I'm involved in a conflict and I see our values statement hanging on the wall, it forces me to step back and see how I can adjust

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my message to respect the other person or people involved."

Managers must model healthy conflict if it has any hope of becoming a reality. According to Stiebel, managers can model the value of conflict by demonstrating their willingness to learn from others and experiment with these counter-intuitive approaches:
❏ publicly praising employees who are willing to suggest new and different approaches
❏ celebrating the success of counter-intuitive decisions by telling stories about such successes
❏ modeling the kind of behavior that shows a comfort level with conflict.

Glenn Gienko, executive vice president of human resources for Motorola in Schaumburg, Illinois, agrees that leadership, public praise, and storytelling are the keys to making constructive conflict a reality. He says, "Fifteen years ago during an officers' meeting, in which everyone was celebrating the success of the company, one employee stood up in front of his peers and their spouses and proclaimed that Motorola's quality stunk. The willingness of [that lone] employee to speak against the grain ultimately turned into Motorola's highly praised Six Sigma quality effort. Today, we tell this story over and over as a way to show employees what constructive dissent can do for a company."

Reward the behavior you want to encourage. As any good trainer knows, what gets rewarded gets reinforced. If you expect employees to work through difficult problems and take the initiative to find new and better ways to do things, then you had better spell out those expectations in the performance-review system. But don't stop with lower-level employees; managers must also be held accountable. At Flint Ink, an ink manufacturer based in Detroit, managers are held accountable for communicating job expectations to employees, for providing ongoing employee development, and for creating a trusting work environment.

Says Tom Emerson, director of employee relations, "Destructive conflict occurs when employees feel insecure and don't trust management. We hold managers accountable for developing and exhibiting the kind of behaviors that allow employees to trust them."

Make sure employees are equipped to do their jobs. One of the primary sources of conflict in many organiza-

tions is that employees often work outside of their comfort zones. Says Emerson, "We ask employees to do things that are outside their previous area of experience. That makes them feel uncomfortable, which can lead to frustration and conflict." Because of that, Emerson believes that one of the best services a trainer can provide is to make sure employees are prepared to do the jobs they've been assigned.

Provide individualized training when and where needed. Trainers who assume that conflict management, better communication, or management training is the key to nurturing constructive conflict are on the right track, but they're likely to waste an enormous amount of money along the way. Yes, a lot of employees do need to improve their skills in reflective listening, problem solving, collaboration, negotiation, and communication. But not everyone does. Instead of wasting training dollars trying to create a one-size-fits-all con-

flict management program, the time would be better spent two ways. One, teach managers how constructive conflict adds value and how they can model the kind of behaviors that encourage positive dissent or creative abrasion. Two, provide training in communication and conflict management only to employees who need it. You determine which ones by holding managers accountable for employee development. In the end, it's a tricky proposition to encourage the kind of ripe and juicy conflict that leads to innovation. Motorola's Gienko says, "It's definitely more of an art form than a formula." But when conflict is harnessed, amazing things can happen.

As Hirshberg of Nissan put it in his book, *The Creative Priority* (Harper-Business, 1998): "Friction between individuals and groups is typically thought of as something harmful. And it usually is. It generates heat and discomfort, disrupts interactions, and can destroy rela-

tionships. Between a couple, it can lead to divorce. Between countries, it can lead to war. Within corporations, it can distort and disrupt communication and ruin cohesiveness. Businesses of all types spend considerable time and money trying to reduce or eliminate conflict. But in human terms, it's surely one of the most plentiful and volatile sources of energy on the planet."

So, go for it. Just be careful. ❏

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