
Conflict, like Spring, is "Busten out all Over"

By Lynne Eisaguirre

Okay, it's a bad use of the classic *Oklahoma Musical* song but I couldn't resist.

After a couple of years when our clients didn't want to deal with the issue of conflict because they were focused on more "nuts and bolts" kinds of issues, clients are now requesting more specific help on conflict, both in terms of training as well as interventions. What's causing this boom? I'm not sure but the economy and all the resulting chaos and change has certainly left everyone cranky and unsettled.

As I wrote in my book, [*The Power of a Good Fight Embracing Conflict to Drive Productivity, Creativity and Innovation*](#), you can reliably predict that conflict follows changes just as spring follows winter.

For example, I was recently asked to intervene with a group that called themselves "grumpy old men." This gang of three managers was so conflicted that even their employees noticed and complained. They were all on performance improvement plans – which helps with motivation – but they needed someone to discover what was going on and to help them build skills. The company didn't want to fire them because they worked in an essential function and could not be easily replaced.

Tips: What Works with Workplace Conflict?

As with the "grumpy old men," (we'll ignore the inappropriate stereotypes for the moment) most groups need three things to change their unproductive approach to conflict:

1. A different attitude
2. An understanding of styles
3. Skills.

With this group, they needed to understand that conflict was a part of life and they had better – if they wanted to keep their jobs – learn how to deal with it. With regard to styles, the managers represented the classic opposite approaches– one manager was too aggressive about conflict and another was too timid. The fearful manager constantly tried to avoid the inevitable clashes that happen in any group. His fear caused him to shut down and run away. Their director was a part of the problem also, avoiding the tough decisions and role assignments that he needed to make to prevent squabbling.

We worked on many skills but one was what I call the "beyond technique." What I mean by that is that many groups are fighting about things that are *beyond* their ability to solve – the budget, organizational changes and so on – but they are so focused on these issues and so far down in the trenches that they don't see what they're doing.

One useful facilitation technique for this issue is to draw a circle on a flip chart or white board and write down all the issues that are within the circle – things that this group has the power to change or deal with – and all the things that are "beyond issues"—things that are outside the circle and beyond their ability to change.

As the discussion progresses, the leader or facilitator can easily steer the group when it drifts into shark invested waters outside the circle, things that it's pointless to talk about and that just result in a lot of useless whining and complaining. The visual, I find, keeps everyone on track and makes it easy to point out when the discussion is out of bounds.

Much more on the subject of attitude, styles and skills, including beyond skills, can be found in my book, [*The Power of a Good Fight Embracing Conflict to Drive Productivity, Creativity and Innovation.*](#)