The scene was becoming increasingly familiar to me: six warring Vice Presidents and their beleaguered CEO gathered around a table. The current battle arose over the direction of the business, but it could have been anything. They'd reached the stage where fighting just to fight seemed like a good idea.

Because two of the officers were women, I'd been brought in to help "sensitize" the men. After talking with each officer individually I reached a conclusion that surprised the CEO. Although there were some diversity issues, the underlying problem was the way the individuals and the group approached conflict and decision making. Different members of the group used different conflict resolution styles: some avoided conflict, some relished fighting, others triangulated conflict. They favored talking with someone other than the person with whom they had conflict. All of the individuals lacked conflict resolution and consensus-building skills.

If you're going to be viewed as a strategic business partner in your organization—rather than a dinosaur—you must develop your own conflict resolution skills and develop a reputation for leadership in conflict resolution and consensus building. Since many HR professionals chose the profession because they like people, or because they have good "people skills," many seem to view conflict as the enemy. I constantly hear my clients complain about wanting to move to a job where there is "less conflict" or where "things are less political."

My experience is that conflict-free organizations are rare. Even if you do find one, an apparently calm organization may not deliver on the professional's true needs. Conflict—skillfully resolved—tends to develop more creative and vibrant organizations. As Jim Autry, former President of Meridith Corp., emphasizes:

"If you think managing conflict and managing diversity are loaded with problems, then you haven't thought through the problems of managing sameness. I'd rather be faced with trying to achieve harmony and goodwill among people who are at one another's throats than try to square an ounce of innovation or creativity or risk out of a company full of photocopies of each other."

If you want to change the way HR is perceived in your organization, start assuming leadership in teaching and modeling conflict resolution and consensus building skills. In order to succeed, you must first examine your own view on conflict: do you avoid conflict and therefore, allow disagreements to fester? Be careful—this is your personal conflict resolution style. Conflicts can evolve into a negative spiral of conflict. When we reach the bottom of the spiral, some important psychological changes occur: we're unable to see the opposing party or parties clearly; our perceptions of the others will be clouded; we'll suspect every action, no matter how innocent. What's significant about this change is that we don't even realize that this is happening. We'll continue to insist that we see the situation accurately. At that point, conflict is difficult to resolve and frequently results in litigation or violence—expensive and tragic outcomes.

Other conflict resolution styles include an aggressive, what I call "pit-bull," style. This style may result in temporary victories but damages the relationship and the organization over time because it does not meet the needs and interests of the parties involved. Even if people submit to the will of the pit bull, there may be foot-dragging, time-wasting and perhaps even sabotage.

If you triangulate conflict, you may need to learn to talk directly to the person with whom you have the problem, rather than others. Complaining to third parties about the conflict results in what I call triangulation: the conflict process is triangulated rather than resolved. If you need to ventilate, choose a trusted advisor—coach, counselor or priest—outside the organization.

Consider the possibility of welcoming conflict and developing a balanced approach. Try to discover the needs and interests of all parties involved and invest creative solutions that address those needs, rather than becoming polarized on positions. A hundred years ago John Dewey, the great thinker, writer and the founder of our modern educational system, wrote:

"Conflict is the girdle of thought. It stirs us to observation and memory. It instigates to invention. It shocks us out of sheep-like passivity, and sets us at noting and contriving.... Conflict is a sine qua non of reflection and ingenuity."

Learning to work skillfully with conflict and to encourage both conflict resolution and consensus-building skills in your organization will help move you into lead-
ership as a strategic business partner in your organization and not a dinosaur.

"In a culture that tends to leave the resolution of conflict to lawyers and law enforcement officers, few people have experienced the rewards that can come from working openly and skillfully with disagreements." —Authors Carolyn R. Shaffer and Kristin Anundsen

Lynn Eisaguirre is an attorney, author and president of Workplaces That Work, a human resource management and career development consulting and training company. Workplaces That Work focuses on employee relations and organizational development including harassment, diversity, conflict resolution, management and employee development.

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**SHRM Corner**

The Society for Human Resources Management (SHRM) held its 49th annual conference in San Diego, California, June 22–25. SHRM reports that this was their largest conference ever. Over 10,000 SHRM members attended this great event! Conference participants had the opportunity to see and hear first-class speakers while enjoying the beautiful city of San Diego.

Several CHRA members had the opportunity to attend the conference. All agreed this was the best conference ever. One of the conference highlights was keynote speaker, Scott Adams, creator of Dilbert. Scott Adams indicated that he thought it was ironic that the creator of Dogbert, the Evil Human Resources Manager, was asked to be a keynote speaker at a human resources conference. Adams shared his experiences creating the Dilbert character and related how he was able to overcome many rejections to ultimately become the success that he is today.

Maria Herriges, Human Resource Manager for the Fire and Police Pension Association, had the opportunity to attend the conference. Maria has attended five SHRM conferences and reports that this conference was the best! Maria stated that, "The conference was well organized and every program was great." for Maria, David Ulrich’s presentation was a highlight.

SHRM is busy planning the 50th annual conference. The conference will be in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in June of 1998. If you would like information about the conference, please call SHRM at 1-800/283-7476.