Conflict Management

Without these skills, you enter a deadly war.

by Howard Guttman

TODAY, THE ABILITY TO influence, rather than to wield power, is a defining capability of leadership. "My way or the highway" is fast becoming "our way or no way." Sure, leaders must be visionaries and savvy cheerleaders, but they also play a key role in managing differences in viewpoints, encouraging debate, discouraging political intrigue and vest-pocket decision making, and fostering open confrontation and issue resolution.

When John Doumani stepped into the president's role at Campbell Soup, Asia/Pacific, he found a siloed organization with little intercommunication and cooperation. At an early meeting of his leadership team, he noted that if a person has an issue, he or she has the right to stand up and voice it. Members took notice when Doumani congratulated them for taking him on.

Leaders must become the walking embodiment of best practices in conflict management. One best practice: holding people accountable for confronting issues and working toward solutions by converting stalemates to a full-team concern and by putting responsibility for planning resolution on "we" not "you."

If there is disagreement, whether vocalized or buried, the leader must surface the issue and bring it into the open so that relevant players can work toward resolution. The faster the leader identifies the team's situation as a "stalemate," the quicker conflict becomes normalized.

The leader must also serve as a mirror for key players. Let's face it, conflict often erupts because of unintended miscues and blind spots, especially given the high-voltage personalities of today's leaders. Few stop to ask: How am I coming across? What's the impact of my words? Are my gestures delivering an undesired subtext? Am I alienating key players? Self-sabotage is a silent killer that can destroy effectiveness.

Teams also have a way of silently diluting effectiveness, and the leader must hold up a mirror to team performance. A good starting place is to ask these five questions:

• From "not clear" to "very clear," how do you rate the clarity of team goals?

• From "not effective" to "very effective," how would you rate how effectively this team accomplishes its goals?

• From "independently" to "interdependently," how do you think team members currently work together?

• From "there is no tolerance for confrontation; conflicts are suppressed" to "tensions are surfaced, confronted, and resolved within the team," how well is conflict handled by the group?

• From "not clear" to "very clear," how clear are you about your role and accountability on the team? What about other people's roles and accountabilities?

Leaders and HR professionals are in a unique position to hold up a mirror to self-sabotaging individual behavior and to the way teams are structured and perform, pointing out the blind spots and disconnects and making people aware of the need for change.

Another role for leaders is to become process coaches in conflict management. This involves, first, becoming sensitive to the pressure points. The modern enterprise—with its asynchronous work patterns, remote management, just-in-time orientation, skinnied-down resources, and continuous vulnerability to competitive threats—is a holding pen for conflict. Where do departments or functions interface? Where is responsibility fuzzy? Where are the critical handoff points on projects? Where is competition for resources greatest? HR must locate the hot spots, calibrate the pressure, and look for ways to relieve it without shunting disagreement.

One way to do this is to coach those who face difficult situations. We find that people face conflict in one of four ways. One is to play the victim—say nothing, act powerless, and complain; another is to leave—physically remove oneself from involvement; a third way is to change oneself—move off one's position, or "let it go"; fourth is to confront—address the issue openly and communicate with the other party. While there are risks and rewards for each strategy, confronting conflict directly carries the greatest benefit, at the least cost. Moving people in tough situations toward this option presents a great challenge.

In organizations that effectively manage conflict, management protocols guide individual and team behavior. Typical rules of engagement include: don't triangulate or bring an issue to a third-party rescuer for resolution; don't recruit supporters to your point of view; resolve an issue or let it go; don't accuse in absentia; and don't personalize issues. When such protocols are reinforced, they become embedded in the way teams operate and people behave.

Transferring conflict-management skills must become part of a leader's repertoire. Turning conflict into confrontation and successful outcomes takes skill. Transferring that skill must begin early in the career of every emerging leader. True, you want the "young tigers" to challenge the prevailing wisdom and come forward with new ideas. But, without proper conflict-management skills, you risk turning the process into a deadly war game.

Seek venues for upwardly mobile employees to practice conflict management skills. Put future leaders in challenging situations where they will have to influence peers and interact with those above them. **EE**

ACTION: Develop your conflict management competency.