When Senior CLASH

INTERVIEW BY DALE COREY

Even in the best run of organizations, there are conflicts—and not only at the lowest rungs of the management ladder. Since disagreements between senior executives can grow, draw many into the fray and diminish performance, top managers need to know not only how to intervene but also when.

A person with answers is Howard Guttman, founder and principal of Guttman Development Strategies, Inc., a Ledgewood, N.J.–based management consulting firm specializing in organization development, executive coaching and implementing high-performance teams. Since 1989, his organization has worked at senior levels with major international corporations.

THE STATE OF AFFAIRS

When so much attention has been paid recently to leadership training, team building and empowerment, why does conflict management continue to be such a significant issue?

Let's face it, conflict has been around since Adam and Eve. But the modern business enterprise, with its crumbling hierarchies, global reach, asynchronous work patterns and dog-eat-dog competitive pressures, has become a holding pen for conflict.

Just think about how organizational structure has changed. The old business model, inherited from German sociologist Max Weber, was highly functionalized and built on a structure of command and control. Each tier of an organization reported to its immediate superior and orders filtered back from the top in the same way. It was easy to understand

Executives

your role in the chain, and power followed form and structure. Conflict rarely had a chance to surface.

If a company were to function like this today, it would have the same chance of survival as a dinosaur in a tar pit. The modern, horizontal business organization has what amounts to a skeleton crew of executives at the top in traditional roles; virtually everyone else works together across multidisciplinary, global teams, with only three or four layers of management. This certainly makes organizations more nimble and adaptable to market changes, but it often leaves executives trying to exert influence—rather than exercise power—over people they don't even know, much less supervise. It's a quantum shift from the old world and a tinderbox for conflict.

I guess, then, we're stuck with conflict. But can it ever be banked so it doesn't flare up to ignite an organization?

Whenever people are brought together, each with his or her individual needs, there's potential for disagreement. The workplace is no hot tub. Conflict is inevitable. If by "banking conflict" you mean suppressing it, that would be unrealistic and, I dare say, counterproductive. It's often hard to get people to believe it, but conflict can be a positive force. Remember the old ad featuring near-mythic strongman Charles Atlas, whose physique bulged by putting muscle against muscle? He called it "dynamic tension." Executives who have learned to manage conflict don't attempt to eliminate it; they bring competing energies together to achieve a positive outcome. I like to think of it as dynamic tension for an organization.

It's easier said than done.

True, but there are executives who have learned to manage conflict effectively. I remember working with a large apparel manufacturer in the northeast where the president faced a feud between the vice presidents of design and manufacturing.

The designers kept missing deadlines on a new product launch, putting enormous pressure on the folks on the shop floor. The president brought his two VPs together and told them that their disagreement could well have dire consequences. Rather then play Solomon by solving the problem for them, he gave the two combatants a week to work together and come up with a plan for remedying the situation. And just to be sure his point had gotten

through, he informed them that 50 percent of their incentive compensation would be tied to an effective resolution. Not surprisingly, the feud soon became history.

THE TRIANGULATION TRAP

It's a good example of the dynamic-tension concept.

Yes, and it also illustrates another important conflict management lesson: avoid the triangulation trap. The president refused to get drawn in as a rescuer. His job was to coach his key executives so that they could develop their own solution.

There's been a great deal of talk about molding groups of ho-hum executives into high-performance teams. How do you do this, given the superegos, inherent competitiveness and cross-functional rivalries that often create dissonance and poor performance?

Alignment has become a real hurrah term—and with good reason. It's pivotal in moving to high-performance teams. To be truly effective, teams must have four elements in sync: (1) goals must be clear and agreed upon; (2) roles must be well-defined so executives know what they are responsible for and authorized to do; (3) protocols must be established; and (4) interpersonal relationships must be properly managed.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PROTOCOLS

Can you talk a little about protocols and why they are important?

Protocols are rules of engagement. They're how members of a team play when confronting a disagreement. They provide an agreed-upon structure for discussion and decision making. Without them, an orderly assault on a tough issue can easily devolve into mayhem.

We saw one protocol in action in the apparel company example: don't triangulate. Triangulation poisons effective conflict management. It shifts the onus to a third party, encourages avoidance behavior and doesn't help develop the skills needed to resolve issues. Another useful protocol is, don't accuse in absentia. This ground rule relates to honoring those who are not present in a meeting.

Any discussion of an issue relating to a team member should be postponed until he or she is present. One of the most important protocols—and the most difficult to ingrain in team members—is, don't personalize issues. Treat differences of opinion not as personal assaults, but as a "business case" that needs to be explored.

Do teams go through some type of evolution before they arrive at the vaunted plateau of high performance?

When you look at teams through the lens of conflict management, you see that they typically progress through four stages.

STAGE ONE In "Testing" conflict is subterranean. Team members are not honest with one another. Conflict is treated as "wrong." Side deals are standard procedure.

STAGE TWO "Infighting" is thick with conflict. Finger-pointing, aggressive posturing and lack of closure on business issues are typical.

STAGE THREE   In "Getting Organized" teams make an honest attempt to deal with conflict head-on. They set common goals, have clearly delineated roles and establish protocols for resolving conflict.

STAGE FOUR "High Performance" capitalizes on the progress made in the previous stage and adds a number of characteristics, such as commitment to "winning for the business," comfort with managing conflict, commitment to the leadership approach, having the "right" players in place and an overriding sense of ownership and accountability.

Most executives I've run into would opt for being in the High Performance stage. What gets in the way?

Managing conflict effectively is no easy task. People tend to be uncomfortable in this area. They often lack the skills to be properly engaged. Second, conflict is typically looked upon as bad. I've seen entire organizations stricken with the ostrich syndrome. They are steeped in denial that conflict exists. In addition, few organizations have protocols in place for dealing with conflict. As a result, they tend to retreat to their comfort zone in contentious situations. This is a big mistake. And participants in a conflict situation don't often feel that there's anything to gain from reaching out to resolve a dispute, or from acting in a way that makes conflict a progressive force. If your compensation is hooked to your functional self-interest, why bother?

HOT SPOTS FOR CONFLICTS

You mentioned earlier that today's organizations are ripe for conflict. Where should executives look for the hot spots of conflict?

Sociologists tell us that social phenomena can either be manifest or latent. Conflict is no exception. Conflict can be right out in the open and glaringly obvious, as in Stage Two teams. This kind of conflict is preferable to the latent type—where issues fester just below the surface, and no one has the courage to bring them out into the open. Latent conflict is what characterizes Stage One teams. How do senior managers know what stage their team is in? They should ask: Are the goals of our senior teams clear, and are they shared by all team members? Do our executive team members know where their responsibilities begin and end and what they are accountable for? Are protocols in place, and do team members have an agreed-upon process for making decisions? If the answers here are no or maybe, then executives beware!

CYBERCONFLICTS

Cyberspace poses a whole new area for conflict in organizations. What do you see as the major challenges posed by electronic communications to effectively manage conflict?

E-mail, which is fast becoming the dominant medium for communication in organizations, is potentially a very hazardous area. In a major pharmaceutical company I know, one executive characterizes many of the e-mails he receives as "heat-seeking missiles" with not only direct-hit potential, but also the ability to do considerable collateral damage.

What makes e-mail such a potential danger?

Given the number of e-mail messages that executives receive—most of the executives I know get anywhere from 50 to 100 a day—the speed and ease of response, and the ability to circulate messages with a click, there is a great potential for mischief. But e-mail is not just about speed and efficiency and information; it is also about unscreened emotions, opinions untempered by body language and thoughts—some hostile and provocative—unrefined by reflection. E-mail is a one-dimensional communication vehicle. By its very nature, e-mail only delivers part of the message. It deals in "content." The vital subtext of an idea or directive, which can often be perceived only in face-to-face or voice-to-voice communication, is lost entirely when the message is reduced to a matter of bytes and pixels.

So what's the solution? Should we click "close" and never again open an e-mail?

E-mail is one of the great modern communication mediums, especially in our nanosecond business environment. It's imperative that we know when and when not to use it. When managing or attempting to resolve conflict, picking up the phone can go a lot further than just clicking "send." I suggest, first, that executives test their understanding of e-mail messages on two levels. Ask if the content is clear. Then, step back from the content to ask: what are the underlying feelings being conveyed or implied? And, when you are the e-mailer, identify the goal of your message. Ask yourself, "What's the purpose of this e-mail?"

In other words, put yourself in the other person's situation.

Exactly! I refer to it as the Golden Rule of e-mail.

I suppose that, as for all other aspects of an organization, ultimately it is the leader who is responsible for ensuring that conflict remains a healthy rather than a destructive element of organizational life. What's your advice to the top leadership?

The most important advice may be the most obvious—and the most neglected! The leader exercises a kind of gravitational pull on the rest of the organization. It is what a leader does that is truly decisive. Let me give you a quick list of "dos" that I've seen role-model conflict managers practice:

• **Be candid—**put all the issues on the table for discussion.

• **Be receptive—**let everyone know that disagreement is a virtue.

• **Depersonalize—**ego should take a back seat.

• **Clarify the decision-making rules.**

• **Ban triangulation.**

• **Learn to listen—and listen to learn.**

• **Hold your team members accountable.**

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