

They're Probably Lying to You!

Step 3: Do Your Homework...and Make Conflict Management an Everyday Thing

Most people hate dealing with conflict! It's uncomfortable, takes time, and frankly, it's often low on the priority list. Seriously, each of us can think of other things we'd much rather do than manage conflict. Unfortunately, our reticence to embrace conflict cheats us out of the kind of trust-building opportunities that only comes from successful conflict management: when you know you can have a difficult conversation with someone and still get along with them, you are more likely to give them meaningful feedback, seek their perspective, and enjoy working with them.

Leaders who want to insulate their teams (and themselves) from the counterproductive aspects of unresolved conflict must find ways to embed healthy conflict management practices into their culture so that they become habits or "just what we do".

Think about each member of your team and how you think they manage conflict. Then, ask yourself the three questions below:

1. How could you make each person feel safe enough to take a risk on something new or share a perspective that they think is unwelcomed or controversial?

- a. Identify others within the organization who share unwelcomed or controversial opinions and who have successfully moved up and/or around within the organization.
- b. Set aside regular time to brainstorm and start with an approach like, "If we removed X from our service or product, how would we reposition ourselves to compete? How would we adapt?"
- c. Highlight employees' efforts to generate new idea in their performance reviews.
- d. Give company-wide recognition and powerfully symbolic gifts for those who are consistently looking for opportunities to innovate and improve. Be careful to avoid the [overjustification effect](#).
- e. Regularly talk about how the ability to learn, change, and grow is vital to staying relevant in the marketplace and how your organization is keeping up.
- f. Encourage curiosity and relationship-building within your organization. On your intranet or in some other highly visible space, ask employees to list skills they'd like to learn, skills they'd like to teach, and people in the organization they'd like to get to know. Then, find a way to encourage them to actually contact one another, i.e., facilitate a networking activity, leaders encourage people to "make it happen" (and it would help a lot if the leader participated), and encourage team members talk about their experiences.



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- g. Encourage team members to focus on asking curiosity questions before criticizing ideas. Explain the difference between true questions versus critiques framed as questions.

2. When someone has risked trying something new or sharing a perspective that they think is unwelcomed or controversial, how can you get them to believe that YOU, nor the team, will hold a grudge against, insult, harshly tease, or minimize them or their idea ?

- a. Assign someone or small group to play the “Devil’s Advocate” role for new ideas and projects and tell other team members that they are welcome to submit suggestions, including anonymous ones, to the person/group
- b. During meetings, REQUIRE each person to share a strength and weakness of an existing practice. To prevent group think or verbal “band wagoning”, give attendees index cards and have them write and submit their responses during the meeting.
- c. Address discouraging behavior when it happens, particularly when it occurs publicly (in meetings, during water cooler moments, etc), i.e., “Actually, I think it’s great that Tony has spent time thinking about this because.....” Additionally, when you observe recurring inappropriate behavior, address the employee who is causing the problem to understand what’s going on.
- d. Seek out the opinions of people who have risked sharing different perspectives in the past.
- e. Talk about useful mistakes made by individuals and what the team has learned from collective failures. Make reviewing projects and initiatives to identify best practices and understand failures and mistakes a routine practice. Additionally, share your personal expectations about failure and mistakes and encourage your team members to do the same. Discuss how someone distinguishes between a risk worth taking versus “stupid risks” because clarifying the differences supports psychology safety.
- f. Encourage team members to ask permission to give feedback to get the parties to own what they are doing, i.e., gossiping, complaining, and undermining morale or something else. For example, encourage team members to ask questions like these when they are discussing ideas, whether in large meetings or in 1:1 conversations: would you mind if I shared my opinion on this, do you want to discuss your idea and perspective or are you asking me to give you space to vent or vet your idea, what do you need to overcome your concern or objection?

3. How do you reinforce the idea that being a team player doesn’t equal pretending?

- a. Be frank. Tell your team when an issue is truly up for discussion versus when the issue is one that they’ll have to accept.
- b. Make a point of hearing people out as sign of respect; but accept and articulate that consensus and full agreement aren’t necessary for good teamwork.
- c. Create time and space for “difficult conversations” so that people know they will have an opportunity to be heard.
- d. In your team-building and getting to know activities, ask people to share elements of themselves that make them unique.
- e. When you engage in team-building activities, luncheons, etc., make a point of trying new things, new restaurants/caterers, etc.
- f. In terms of interpersonal differences, make it clear that respect is not optional. Likewise, go out of your way to be inclusive and make space for differences.