

Dark clouds on the horizon, and the radar tells me deep squalls are only 20 minutes away. Clearly, we need to change the sails.

The first mate feels differently. He thinks we'll ride out the squalls. Changing the sails in a storm will take too long, and we need to make up time. This is a race, after all.

Past memories of a freak storm at sea flood my anxieties. Anxious expressions on the faces of the crew tell me I'm not alone in my views. Nobody speaks up.

The first mate takes the wheel, determined to ride it out. I'm not so sure. The yacht surges forward into the dark night, surf hissing off the bow...

UPS AND DOWNS

Needless to say, we made up time and arrived safe and sound, thanks to the first mate's greater experience of helming a yacht through a storm. This may be a dramatic – and true – story, but work can sometimes feel a little like this. When faced with uncertainty and pressure, even the most experienced teams and leaders will disagree over the best way forward.

Conflict arises through differences in goals, motives, beliefs, behaviours, assumptions and perceptions. Conflict is regarded as destructive, to be avoided at all costs. It can quickly become an unproductive force as anxiety arises over tough challenges and difficult choices.

Paradoxically, when conflict is worked through constructively, it can provide a crucible for creative solutions, better decisions and

improved performance. This stems from deeper engagement with the issues, and lies at the heart of collaborative working.

Stormy times can be those of the greatest learning – at sea, in life, as well as in business. Challenging periods are often when we develop new skills, and find the confidence to ride the ups and downs that are part of life's voyage.

MANAGING THE STORM

The management of conflict is a critical skill for business leaders facing the challenges of building collaboration across commercial and cultural boundaries. When the pressure mounts, leaders must make effective decisions very quickly and engage the workforce to keep ahead of competitive pressures.

Conversely, the inability to manage conflict constructively can impair performance and derail even the best-positioned strategies, as unresolved issues remain under the table and opposing views collide.

COACHING FOR CONFLICT

The business coach has a key role to play in conflict, providing detachment and a neutral environment by standing outside the storm, and helping individuals and teams to work through their inner and interpersonal conflicts.

A coach requires a strong awareness of his or her own drivers, in order to view a situation with the neutrality, detachment, patience and respect needed to help others work through the issues they face. The challenge is to prevent a

Conflict is usually viewed as a negative force – but when handled well, it can pave the way for more creative teamworking and improved performance

By Martin Down

STORMING AHEAD

potentially constructive conflict from degenerating into a harmful one, by encouraging people to voice their position, strongly if need be, without falling out.

The reality for leaders is that, although many agree constructive conflict can improve the quality of decision-making, achieving this can be a task for which they feel ill-prepared. Much depends on individual personalities and leaders' experience of conflict in the past. Some

executives see themselves firmly as "rational" decision-makers and find it difficult to deal with the emotional and irrational dimension of human behaviour. Others find it hard to express disagreement or vary their attitude when faced with conflict.

People factors

Individual personality styles – as set out by the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator – may also make a

difference. For example, those with a need for detail may experience inner and interpersonal conflicts if their needs are not met. Conversely, those who need to see the big picture may experience conflicts caused by too great an emphasis on detail.

People's motives, as defined by David McClelland, the late Harvard professor of psychology, will also have an impact on conflict. For example, those motivated by creating friendly, close relationships will experience discomfort where harmonious relationships break down or do not exist.

Other influences are individuals' values and personality traits, which in turn are based on culture, beliefs and social conditioning. Those accustomed to an environment where conflict is openly addressed are more likely to be comfortable in confronting situations and less likely to fear and avoid conflict.

Some find that rank and privilege, or lack of trust, may inhibit them from sharing their true feelings about a situation, particularly if their manager has a directive style ("do as I say") that gives little scope for sharing ideas.

MORE LESSONS FROM THE HIGH SEAS

The Global Challenge, one of the toughest yacht races, is fertile ground for assessing the critical success factors for effective collaboration and conflict management. It is a harsh, unpredictable environment, where crews face the added pressures of sleep deprivation and confined living.

Research on the 2000-01 Global Challenge, by the Inspirational Intelligence Research Forum (IIRF), found that better-performing skippers had a stronger appreciation of conflict management and often encouraged "positive conflict". Poorer skippers tended to dislike conflict and avoid confrontation. Failure to deal with issues impaired the crew's motivation and respect.

Successful skippers demonstrated higher degrees of maturity, self-awareness and emotional intelligence, recognising the impact of their behaviours and sharing feelings, which in turn built rapport, respect and understanding. They also demonstrated emotional resilience, greater receptiveness to feedback and the ability to take a detached standpoint.

CONFLICT: CAUSES AND STRATEGIES

The IIRF analysis of the Global Challenge found that the causes of conflict tended to centre on the

Learning points

- Constructive conflict can provide a crucible for creative solutions, better decisions and improved performance, stemming from deeper engagement with issues.
- Business coaches can provide detachment and a neutral environment by standing outside the conflict, helping individuals and teams to work through their inner and interpersonal conflicts.
- Individual personality styles, such as those set out by the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, influence how people experience inner and interpersonal conflicts.
- Agreeing goals, tasks and roles and dealing with conflict, rather than letting it fester, helps to avoid disagreement.
- To be effective, coaches need:
 - to develop a strong awareness of their own drivers so they can view a situation with the necessary neutrality, detachment, patience and respect to help others work through the issues they face;
 - to prevent a potentially constructive conflict from degenerating into a harmful one by encouraging people to voice their position without falling out.

way leaders managed the "what", "how" and "who" of a situation:

● Managing the "what"

A lack of a clear, defined purpose – goals, tasks and roles – leads to disagreement about how goals are to be achieved and tasks carried out. Higher-performing skippers clarified roles and agreed standards of performance early on, focusing attention on the bigger picture and on solutions, rather than laying blame when goals were not met.

● Managing the "how"

The absence of fair processes to involve team members in decision-making can lead to assumptions being made and a mismatch between people's perception and reality.

Successful skippers in the Global Challenge recognised the importance of dealing with conflict and not allowing it to fester. They spent more time listening to others and encouraging constructive debate on options, which fostered commitment to decisions. They also had more mechanisms for communication and knowledge-sharing, and were seen to be fair and effective in getting crews' buy-in to their decisions.

● Managing the "who"

A lack of "connectedness" in team relationships can stem from differing values, views and performance standards. In addition, conflict can emerge from individuals' insensitivity to others'

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needs – in the case of the race, sleep. Higher-performing skippers sensed emotional charge over such issues, and struck a balance in acknowledging emotions and facts. They shared values with the crew and acted as a mediator.

WHAT IT MEANS FOR LEADERSHIP

Research on emotional intelligence and on the Global Challenge demonstrates that a leader's personal qualities and self-awareness are critical to the emotional engagement of others.

Effective conflict resolution requires taking account of the political and emotional, as well as the rational, needs of people.

Rational needs can typically be met by agreeing common goals in order to develop group cohesion, recognising that people are less likely to see themselves as political winners or losers when driving an agenda they have bought into themselves. Equally, rational needs can be met through providing more factual and objective data to reduce the scope for debate over shades of opinion.

Likewise, offering a greater range of options helps to defuse conflict and create more flexibility for people to contribute their views.

The fewer the options, the greater the risk of conflict, the logic goes.

What the rational approach lacks is the ability to engage emotionally those involved in a conflict. Emotional engagement acknowledges that people seek recognition and value, and are more likely to feel committed when they feel their views have been taken into account and valued. Achieving this requires a safe environment in which others can make their views heard:

- accepting that silence does not necessarily mean agreement and finding out what people really think by encouraging everyone to have their say;
- being aware that management by consensus does not always work, and that different views may remain under the table, resulting in a lack of engagement with a decision;
- creating a safe forum for others to share a different point of view, by openly communicating the strengths and weaknesses of each option available;
- actively searching for the wisdom of different perspectives that will enrich the quality of decision-making;
- recognising the difficulties facing those who hold a different perspective, and being prepared for expressions of anger, defensiveness or frustration;
- ensuring that the minority does not dominate, but exploring what they need to go along with the majority decision and be included in the decision-making process.

It also requires a safe environment for your own view to be heard:

- clearly communicating that you are willing to share a different perspective;
- positioning your own perspective by linking it to shared goals, supporting it with objective facts, avoiding personal attacks, explaining the benefits of your perspective, and positively identifying those who share part of your perspective, or a different perspective, to maintain a balanced power structure.

Ultimately, the role of the coach is to provide the neutrality and detachment for leaders to develop self-insights that will help them to manage conflict effectively and explore options for managing the rational, political and emotional elements of conflict, in order to engage their teams in driving the best solutions. Conflict can drive them on, not apart. ■