

This is an excerpt from my book, “Never Kick a Cow Chip On a Hot Day”

Mantra # 3: Effective Leaders Embrace Conflict to Create Change

Conflict is one of the topics with which CEOs most often struggle. Unfortunately, the prevalent mindset is that you should minimize it. That is wrong—you should *optimize* it. Let me explain.

I recently gathered a group of executives together to discuss organizational conflict. Early in the conversation, I asked them to rate the level of conflict in their organization on a specific scale. On one end of the continuum was a high level of conflict both in frequency and veracity, with personal attacks as commonplace. On the other end of the scale was conflict avoidance where everyone was “nice,” but important issues were completely ignored. In the middle was optimal conflict, where people were comfortable speaking their mind, differing opinions were explored with focus on the issue rather than individuals, and the arguments were evidence based. Most every executive rated their organization as being firmly on the conflict avoidance side of the scale.

If there is too much conflict in your organization, you will not have productive conversations. People will worry more about winning the argument than moving the business ahead. In extreme situations—usually the result of a highly combative CEO—there are two possible scenarios. The first is the company is full of aggressive people who care much more about their personal gain than the success of the team. The second scenario is that the company chews through talented people who won’t allow the abuse, and is therefore left with very weak players. If there is too little conflict, the end result is the same: business suffers. Good ideas are not surfaced and silly behavior is tolerated because no one wants to hurt feelings.

Organizations with too much conflict or too little conflict often have the following characteristics:

- Confusing organizational design and/or authority limits
- Objectives, strategy and vision not clear
- Values not clearly stated
- Lack of trust
- Unwillingness to hold others accountable
- Hallway reversals allowed (lack of commitment)
- Some bad apples on the team
- CEO not modeling the correct behavior
- Misaligned rewards

I once facilitated a meeting with the top 30 people of a large organization. They were conflict averse and wanted to move towards the sweet spot on the conflict scale. One executive described a meeting that he recently attended with his colleagues in the room as a complete waste of time. The other executives all nodded their heads in agreement. Imagine the top 30 people in a large firm spending hours in a non-productive meeting and remaining silent for fear of hurt feelings.

Now imagine that happening a few times month! What are the hard costs (salaries and benefits) and the opportunity costs of that continued behavior?

The truth is you'd be surprised how often your co-workers and team members are thinking the same thing as you. And if someone just embraced a little bit of conflict, everyone would be better for it.

Here is an assessment tool that you can use with your team to identify the level of healthy conflict in your organization. You can use it in two different ways:

1. After a meeting, ask the participants to rate the meeting on this scale.
2. Ask your team members to rate the typical interactions within the organization.

Conflict Measurement Tool	
-4 -3 -2 -1 Optimal +1 +2 +3 +4	

-4	Complete avoidance of conflict even if the issue is critical. Parties unwilling to engage. No resolution possible. Fosters increased lack of trust and respect.
-3	Tentative discussion of what should be a significant issue. Unlikely that issue is moving forward. No resolution. Parties have little trust in each other.
-2	Issue raised but non-assertive communication. May be goal oriented, but fear of stepping on others' toes reduces the effectiveness of the conversation. Parties may not be familiar or have a history of ineffective communication.
-1	Goal focused. Respectful but overly polite (nice) conversation. Issue moved forward, but not all elements explored fully.
<i>Desired State. Assertive communication. Goal focused. Mostly respectful communication. All voices heard. May still be strong discussions, but tough issues are moved forward.</i>	
+1	Tense but goal focused. Participants with low tolerance for conflict may still be uncomfortable. Some statements become personal but are corrected.
+2	Uncomfortable. Slight positive results are possible (e.g. goal oriented actions or statements). Still more goal oriented than personal.
+3	Very uncomfortable. Not goal oriented. Statements are more personal than goal oriented. Situation is salvageable if parties regain control.
+4	Very heated discussion. Voices raised and loss of control by participants. Personal attacks. No positive results. Often exacerbates the problem. Situation not salvageable without significant intervention, probably by a 3 rd party.

You'll notice—if you make use of this assessment tool—that people have different levels of comfort with conflict. Some of us were raised in homes where conflict was taboo. For instance, I grew up in the Midwest in a community that was primarily Scandinavian in heritage, and conflict

was not valued. Overall, people were “nice.” They also ate lutefisk (cod soaked in lye) and potato dumplings, which may explain the lack of fire in their bellies. However, some of you grew up in other regions in the country with families who embraced a culture of frequent conflict.

As the leader of the organization, conflict is one of the “levers” available to you in your quest to craft a healthy culture. Start by asking yourself these questions:

- What is your comfort level with conflict?
- Does it feel like the issues in meetings are fully explored or are there opinions and facts left out?
- Do my team members confront each other when performance is not what it should be?
- Do my team members look for feedback from others in meetings—even those with whom they disagree?
- Are people comfortable pushing back at me when they think that I’m wrong?

*What do you do if you believe that you have a lack of healthy conflict in your organization?
Follow these steps:*

1. Establish trust (more on this later)
2. Establish clear vision/objectives
3. Minimize personal attacks
4. Maximize evidence based discussions
5. Optimize preparation for decisions
6. Encourage healthy debate
7. Insist on commitment once a decision is made

But, what if you have too much unhealthy conflict?

1. Make sure that objectives are clear
2. Don’t allow personal attacks
3. Enforce agreements
4. Leaders must model and reward correct behavior

Remember, creating a culture that embraces positive conflict starts with your attitude towards conflict. If you huff and puff every time something doesn’t go your way, your team will notice exactly how you handle conflict, and avoid it at all costs. But if they see a consistent and steadfast leader, they will maintain that same composure when the going gets tough. Many leaders assume that conflict is just a by-product of interaction and that it is merely a result of individual personality. I don’t believe that. In my experience, you can think about conflict as a manageable tool on an organizational level. Remember, the objective is not to minimize conflict, but rather to *optimize* it!

Real Lesson: You, as CEO, must be comfortable with healthy conflict and optimize it in your company.