



The dilemma: avoid or confront. So often it seems there is no good path when it comes to conflict between coaching staff members. Delivering a difficult, though well-intentioned, message to a fellow coach is often like tossing gasoline on a fire. Even when you sugar coat it you run the risk of a defensive reaction punctuated by a damaged relationship.

Conflict Left Unattended Can Disrupt Goal Achievement.

Anna Seaton-Huntington enjoyed a distinguished collegiate athletic career as a member of the Radcliffe rowing team. She went on to become a Bronze medalist in the 1992 Olympics in Women's pair rowing. Huntington's accomplishments are noted in an entry in the Harvard Varsity Club Hall-of-Fame that reads "She helped to create a program that was prepared to train with focus, proud of their victories and humble in their losses."

In 1995 Seaton Huntington was a vital part of history as a member of the America³ (America Cubed) sailing team. The sailing team was the first all-women's team to enter the prestigious America's Cup yachting race. The team trained a grueling twelve hours a day seven days a week the year prior to the America's Cup. Competing against a field of all male teams America³ held its own and proved the mental and physical toughness of Seaton-Huntington and her colleagues.

Having trained for years with high-performing teams you would think Seaton-Huntington would have little to learn during her sailing career. However, along the way, Seaton-Huntington learned valuable life lessons about leadership and teamwork. The team culture that emerged with the sailing team was one in which conflict avoidance was the norm.

Unresolved Conflict Leads to Low Levels of Trust

As Seaton-Huntington explained, "For our team, the premium was on harmony, or at least an appearance of harmony. We handled conflict by tolerating and avoiding disputes and sticky issues. Because we were told repeatedly to maintain a smooth façade, our conflicts festered instead of erupting, being resolved, and spurring us forward."

When team members aren't open to conflict they shut themselves off from true thoughts, feelings and reactions to issues that naturally arise from being a part of a team. "Too much focus on building consensus can hinder success" said Seaton-Huntington.

Silence Can Lead to Violence.

Lurking behind many seemingly "harmonious" teams is a time-bomb ticking down, ready to explode when one staff member initiates anything perceived to be an attack on a colleague. **Rare is the sudden emotional explosion that wasn't the result of a lengthy period of suppression.**

Cooperating to avoid conflict, while seemingly appropriate, can lead to misunderstanding and mistrust. And the point of conflict can grow until it's out of control. Anguished silence if you will.

What Seaton-Huntington and her team learned was that avoidance of conflict in order to build consensus actually became counterproductive. The harmony they thought they were creating was actually a false sense of trust. The external behaviors and conversations suggested harmony, but the internal thoughts and feelings were complex and creating a whole new set of problems.

For Seaton-Huntington and her teammates the false sense of harmony proved costly. Trust was absent. Without trustworthy behaviors the team was unable to recognize and communicate strengths and abilities of the team's members. Discussion was guarded and issues that needed to be addressed did not surface.

Unresolved conflict can create a team climate that is tense and hostile; or conflict can be an opportunity for improving team member relationships. Trust can be found in commitment to one's team and coaching mates which includes a willingness to embrace the truth to be found in conflict. In conflict team members have the opportunity to resolve uncertainty and negotiate disagreements. When this happens, issues and concerns are shared without fear or vulnerability of disharmony.