

TRUST IN CONFLICT

The dilemma: avoid or confront. So often it seems there is no good path when it comes to conflict between you and a teammate. Delivering a difficult, though well-intentioned, message to a teammate is often like tossing a gasoline on a fire. Even when you sugar coat it you run the risk of a defensive reaction and the likelihood of damaging the relationship. However, in a right relationship with a solid foundation of trust you should be able to engage in productive conversation rather than a defensive battle of the wills (and egos).

Let's face it, conflict happens.

To build a cohesive team you and your teammates must look to conflict *to strengthen* personal relationships and to solve problems. To create healthy and functional relationships you need to reach a high level of mutual understanding through engaging in meaningful conversations. Here are some simple guidelines for addressing a potential conflict.

Guidelines for Effective Confrontations

- Set the context. Establish up front what the issue is.
- Draw out the needs of your teammate.
- Make it timely. It is best not to wait too long. The impact of the resolution offered may be lost with time. It's likely more problems have been generated from the neglected issue.
- Make your teammate feel comfortable. It's not about winning a battle. It's about winning your teammate(s) to the goals and desired end results of the team.
- Your goal is to motivate. Suggest a positive course of action.
- Demonstrate support. Be constructive and positive.
- Choose an appropriate time and location.

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 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.

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

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.

What Seaton Huntington and her team learned was that their 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.

Silence Can Lead to Violence.

For Seaton Huntington and her teammates the false sense of harmony proved costly. Trust was absent. With 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.

Conflict Happens.

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 teammates and 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 ridicule. This creates harmony.

Team Exercise

Conflict might result from such things as clashes of personalities, interactions lacking in respect and integrity for one another, expectations of roles, or conflict over ideas.

Relationships have a rippling effect throughout the whole team. Sit down with your teammates in a quiet setting and discuss with raw honesty the "state" of team member relations.

To create a positive team culture in which you and your teammates are vulnerable and able to engage in functional conflict ask yourself, then as a team, these questions:

- ★ Are we capable of admitting mistakes?
- ★ Are we able to own up to our weaknesses?
- ★ Will we confront behavioral problems directly?
- ★ Are we able to confess our insufficient knowledge?

Ask team members to "Think of a time in the past when a conflict between you and a friend or teammate, once resolved, contributed to a stronger relationship."

Psychologists characterize rage as "the sudden and unexpected emotional explosion that wasn't preceded by a lengthy period of tortured silence."

Discuss with your teammates why they think this statement is true/false. Be sure to hold each speaker accountable for clarifying their perspective—and others accountable for listening.

Use this discussion question to explore the broader topic of emotional intelligence. Allow a free-flowing discussion to emerge. Complete the discussion by asking team members to summarize "Ideas and Actions to Take Away" from this exercise.