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### FROM PAIN TO GAIN: LEARNING TO LEVERAGE CONFLICT

By Dr. Liz Berney

Conflict can result in project standstills at work, rigid organizational factions, interpersonal and family misunderstandings and tumult, and at its worst, war. Thus, many of us have come to fear conflict at all costs. Yet conflict provides golden opportunities for tremendous learning. Whether conflict results in a negative or positive outcome depends on the process by which it is resolved.

Mergers and acquisitions (my dissertation topic) are a case in point. Their extremely high failure rate is in good part, a function of how the integration is managed. Consider this scenario: the buyer company wants to acquire another company because it offers something different and unique. Perhaps the buyer company is large and bureaucratic, even a little slow moving. So it purchases a small, fast growing, new, high-tech company to overcome these weaknesses; it can then respond much more quickly to external changes in the environment. Yet, despite this intention, the buyer company often superimposes its old policies and procedures that make it hard for the acquired firm to be responsive to the external environment. The very aspects the buyer firm once coveted in the seller are the same ones it now impedes. Note the similarity of these dynamics in love relationships; individuals often choose spouses or partners different from them because they find these differences attractive, yet they spend a good deal of time trying to get them to become more like them during the course of the relationship.

#### Definitions

Conflict occurs when two or more parties, be they individuals, teams, even organizations, perceive that they have different needs, goals, or interests that cannot be resolved. The word "perception" is key because the parties may make a number of assumptions about each other that are not valid. Parties often create stories about each other that are inaccurate and based on their own view



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of the world. With these assumptions, the parties make choices, sometimes unconsciously, that lead to either functional or dysfunctional conflict. Functional conflict involves "parties" listening to each other, checking out their initial assumptions and then voicing and working through their differences to a mutually agreeable solution. Dysfunctional conflict involves parties acting "positional," i.e., each insisting on getting what it wants and failing to attend to the other party's needs. Their fear that they will not get their needs met, leads to their acting "positional" and thus unwilling to compromise. Once positional, parties often engage in power battles, making it nearly impossible to reach any kind of mutually acceptable "third way." Power battles are characterized by oppositional and rigid behavior.

Similarly, once partners or spouses in a couple engage in a power battle, there is little hope for resolution. The old adage that couples should not go to bed angry is not true; once engaged in a power battle, parties become increasingly positional and rigid, eliminating any opportunity of inventing effective solutions. Better to get some sleep than to escalate the argument! As a matter of fact, Fisher and Ury, from the Harvard Negotiation Program, suggest that once escalation occurs, parties should "go to the balcony" (metaphorically!), i.e., end the discussion for the time being, take time alone to reflect and calm down, and set a time to reengage with the other party to continue the discussion.

#### Regression Enhances Conflict

Rather than focusing on the overarching goal of the merger and its inherent opportunities, individuals often regress to survival mode, clinging to what they have done in the past. They need to reframe their thinking and ask, "How are we going to reach our new goals? What new strategies will get us there?" Clinging to old ways, acting positionally, insisting on one's own culture prevailing, will only yield the exact opposite of the merger goals—failure! Ironically, when we fear and resist change, we do the exact opposite of what will benefit us—we regress to our fallback position, i.e., how things used to be. We view the world from a child's eyes, as if it is black and white; and then options fail to exist. We polarize and thus are rarely able to step back and see the big picture. At the very time we most need to be open to new possibilities, we regress and contract to earlier stances that no longer serve us. We do a great deal of displacing and projecting onto others daily. They bring anxieties, fears and stories from their past to present day interactions and displace these onto anything that either reminds them of family behaviors (displacement) or of parts of themselves of which they are none too fond (projection). Once they do this, their capacity for listening, brainstorming and joint problem solving is diminished severely. The only way to resolve conflict is for both parties to be curious and learn as much as they can about each other's needs. Listening actively with curiosity also strengthens the relationship between parties because it demonstrates interest in each other, often leading to greater openness from both parties. Buoyed by their understanding and appreciation of the other's needs, both parties are often quite

capable of creating inventive solutions to extremely challenging problems.

## Strategies

The tenets and strategies from the mediation literature, particularly the Harvard Negotiation Program, are extremely useful in both helping to resolve conflict and to provide people with a fuller range of conflict management skills. In particular, interests-based negotiation from the Harvard Negotiation Program, offers specific strategies to identify individual, team and organizational interests, as well as strategies for finding joint solutions based on these interests. Key to interests-based negotiation are listening and empathizing before moving to fact-based problem solving.

It is important to discern between interests and positions. A position is what someone has to have, be it a new computer or a larger budget. If both you and I want the only orange left in the refrigerator, each of our positions is that we have to have the orange. An interest underlies someone's position and can be identified by asking, "Why do you want that? What is most important about that to you? There are usually multiple interests underlying a position. In the orange example, after asking these questions, we learn that I wanted the orange to eat the inside and you wanted the rind to bake a cake. Even when situations do not dovetail as neatly and easily as this one, once interests are identified, many more options are possible.

Individuals engaged in conflict are often reticent to listen to others for fear that they will be perceived as pushovers. They often assume that in order to get what they want, they have to fight and push and demand. Paradoxically those very behaviors yield the opposite result. In contrast, when parties are truly curious about each other's needs, they obtain crucial data, usually allowing them to find a mutually acceptable solution.

People become threatened by these differences and the potential impact on themselves. They may wonder, "Will I have to make major changes? Will these changes knock me off balance? Will I lose any power or influence from the change?" It can be threatening to have to change and try new strategies. That's why people often become positional and insist there is only one possible solution—theirs! The only way to move from that narrow and narcissistic view is to expand one's thinking and reframe the conflict—to realize that there are a host of solutions that can meet each party's goals. Listening does not mean accommodating; to paraphrase Fisher and Ury from the Harvard Negotiation Program, parties need to be "soft" on the relationship (listen and empathize) and "hard" on the issues (no agreement is allowed until most interests are met). Never should parties agree to solutions that do not meet the majority of their interests.

Until we resolve any kind of dynamic with which we struggle internally, the

universe will continually offer us opportunities to address that very dynamic. Let's say that I don't like conflict and passively agree to help others and sacrifice myself regularly. It is likely that I will attract people into my life who take advantage of others, including me. In this case, I am sending clear signals that I will do whatever others need and ignore my own needs. Enter the demanding, controlling boss. This boss is likely to take advantage of those employees like me who allow it. And this dynamic will continue to occur in my life until I learn to set boundaries and limits and pay more attention to my own needs. In *The Law of Attraction*, Esther and Jerry Hicks suggest that we attract to us those people from whom we most need to learn. So in this example, I unconsciously "invite" in controlling people until I learn how to set limits and take care of myself.

#### A Case Study

As a consultant, I once worked with a group of managers who struggled with a terribly controlling boss. After I interviewed each of them, I found that one of the five group members, whom I will call Steve, wasn't experiencing this same problem with the boss. I asked the entire group, "Why doesn't the boss behave this way with Steve?" They didn't have a clue. I then asked them to consider whether Steve acted differently from the rest of them. Eventually, group members concluded that Steve, while willing to work hard, would not tolerate rudeness or any kind of abuse. So the boss didn't waste his energy imposing on Steve. Unconsciously, or perhaps consciously, the boss chose to impose on those in the group who appeared less comfortable saying, "No." The team members thus colluded with the boss by allowing the boss's behavior, thus co-creating the conflict. Why would you ask Susie (i.e., Steve) to try Life cereal when you know that Mikey (the other four managers) will?

There is a great deal of learning possible in these dysfunctional conflicts we co-create. In this case, the managers who failed to set appropriate boundaries were "invited" by their boss to learn how. This boss offered them the opportunity to learn a new skill that they had not yet developed. One can view this scenario in one of two ways. The team members can choose to feel victimized and helpless. Or, they can ask themselves what they could learn about themselves. Once they start setting better limits, the boss is forced to address his own behavior. She or he can learn to manage his or her own aggression and anger rather than dump it on others. So a choice is involved—moan about one's powerlessness or focus on developing one's own skills. Until the managers stop allowing the boss's inappropriate behavior, the boss is likely to continue this behavior. I can promise you that this victim-abuser dynamic will continue to get recreated in different situations for both the boss and the employees until all involved learn to develop their anger management and limit setting skills respectively.

#### Opportunity to Learn

Challenging work situations often offer us the opportunity to develop new skills.

For example, let's say that I am often excluded from important meetings at work. Each time I don't get invited, I could complain to others and feel sorry for myself. Little headway will occur. But if I can wonder how I might have helped create this exclusion, I might learn that people find my behavior overly aggressive. I then have a choice—to temper my behavior and gain inclusion or to refuse to do so and be powerless. We have far more power focusing on what we can change in ourselves rather than what we cannot in others. Many of my clients disagree when I tell them they co-created a problematic situation. They point to the egregious behavior of the other party or parties and tell me that sometimes it really is all the other person's fault. I would argue that these egregious behaviors are never random; we attract them to us so that we can develop parts of ourselves requiring growth. In the previous example, had I not been excluded from meetings, I would not have been challenged to address my aggressive behavior.

Part of what makes conflict so difficult for people to address is breaking organizational and cultural norms, i.e., being direct with feedback about their concerns. Most people are more comfortable complaining to a friend about someone at work rather than addressing the person directly. This indirectness, referred to as triangulation, only makes the problem worse. It is paradoxical (and human) that managers tell me they can't confront someone because they don't want to hurt their feelings. Triangulating by talking to third parties often ends up being far more damaging.

Many clients will tell me they are upset with someone at work but not upset enough to talk to that person directly. Let's say that Jorge is upset with Ming, a colleague who manages a different department. Jorge feels that Ming takes advantage of some of his staff. Rather than deal with Ming directly, he seethes, which his staff notices. Soon after, Jorge's staff and Ming's staff become engaged in conflict. Staff in both departments unconsciously pick up the tension between the department heads. Now, not only is Jorge upset with Ming, but also two departments are no longer cooperating with each other. Had Jorge spoken to Ming directly with his concerns, the conflict between departments could have been prevented. In order for this directness to become a norm in the workplace, employees need to receive "hands-on" training in which they practice giving and receiving feedback, as well as receive feedback on their own feedback skills.

#### The Need for Feedback

Part of giving feedback includes two behaviors rarely mentioned in feedback training: (1) listening and being curious about WHY the feedback receiver did what she or he did and (2) the feedback giver's examining his or her own contribution to the feedback receiver's behavior. For example, when Marge, who likes interacting with others through debate and challenge, communicates with George who prefers harmony and connection, George experiences her as abrasive and argumentative. George may even assume, from Marge's behavior,

that she does not like him. Conversely, Marge may assume George has no interest in connecting with her since he avoids her whenever she tries to communicate with him. Both are inferring intention that does not exist. If George asked Marge about her behavior, he would learn that she was trying to connect with him. Her intention was not to be difficult. George's assumption about Marge was based on a story he told himself. Part of feedback requires being curious about others' intentions. George, who prefers finding commonality with others, read Marge's intentions through his own filter and thus misinterpreted her intentions. When George gives Marge feedback about her behavior, he needs to ask her about her intentions without assuming he already knows them. That is not to say, however, that Marge is not responsible for the impact of her behavior. She is!

Teams just make the whole equation more complicated because of the larger number of individuals. Since teams are typically composed of members who are different along a variety of dimensions, there are more opportunities for team members to misunderstand and make incorrect assumptions about each other. These assumptions can lead to polarization and entrenchment into one's own worldview. When team members manage conflict functionally by listening, exploring and understanding various viewpoints, they become increasingly productive. This task of managing individual differences is central to Tuckman's group stage of "storming." But if team members get locked into positions, they will get stuck and be unable to function productively.

### Identifying Conflict Sources

We need to pay more attention to diagnosing the sources of the conflict before trying to resolve it. A doctor doesn't prescribe an antibiotic without first culturing the bacteria. Often when employees squawk at one another, their managers assume the source of conflict must be personality differences. While the symptoms may look like incompatible personalities, the source may not be. For example, the two could be arguing over different interpretations of their roles; without clarification, the conflict will not be resolved. This confusion may very well be an issue for others in the team as well. Clarifying team member roles, team goals, procedures, policies and norms can help prevent conflict. If the manager doesn't make the roles and responsibilities clear, one team member may think that a particular task is her responsibility while another thinks it is his. More commonly, team members may have different understandings of a project's goals or of team decisions.

Patrick Lencioni, "The Five Dysfunctions of a Team," relays the frequency by which leaders leave meetings after reaching an office-wide decision, only to later learn that they had interpreted the decision differently from one another. Once they realize this, the damage has often been done because they had already shared this decision with their staff members, who in turn were already comparing their department's decision with that of other departments. Once an

agreement is reached, it is important to go around the room and hear everyone's version of the agreement and then discuss it until everyone has the same version. Think of how often one's significant other understands an agreement the couple made in a way completely different from you.

### Understanding Systems Dynamics

In a similar vein, two people arguing may be "acting out" the argument for the group as a whole. For this reason, when I have been asked to coach a "difficult" manager, I am cautious. While this person indeed appears difficult, she or he often voices a need or hurt for the entire group. When these group-level dynamics are at play, focusing the blame on an individual never resolves the conflict. When one person looks like the "bad guy," it is important to check how others in the group feel about the issue too. Often the person scapegoated is the one with the courage to voice the group-level issue affecting everyone. One should always assume that all team members need to participate in group resolution even when only a few voice concerns. The "hard knocks" way of learning about group-level dynamics is working with the "identified" person or persons, only to find that different individuals in the group are quietly upset about the same issue. An "identified patient" or individual focus allows dangerous scapegoating and, at the same time, fails to solve the overall problem. Remember getting in trouble complaining to a teacher when your friends "forgot" to back you up? The teacher thought only you had the concern and may have become angry with you. The teacher failed to realize that this was a group-level issue involving the whole class, one that might impede learning. Perhaps the teacher's explanation was unclear; and the students, while wanting clarity, feared the teacher's potential anger. Had the teacher realized that this might be an issue for the whole class, she or he would have asked other students individually if any had related concerns. It is imperative to consider a group-level perspective when solving team conflict.

Rather than forcefully demanding what one wants, one should use curiosity and active listening resulting in far more leverage in conflict resolution and negotiation. Once one party listens, the other typically returns the favor. After both parties discuss what is important to each of them, they can create space for creative problem-solving to meet both their interests. There are always multiple ways to problem-solve when one moves from what she or he needs to what both parties need.

### Negotiation Case

When I consulted to a small engineering firm that manufactured custom-fit valves, the president was extremely concerned that his marketing director was going to leave. The marketing director needed cash, and the president had none to provide. The president asked me to help the two of them discuss their underlying interests to find a way to satisfy both of them. I didn't expect the

resolution to be particularly challenging—all I had to do was learn why the marketing director needed the cash. I knew the president would be amenable to getting him a loan or providing him with additional resources. However, the marketing director would not share his underlying interests, i.e., why he needed cash immediately. Even when I couldn't identify his underlying interests, a "win-win" was achieved. While the final solution wasn't perfect, it met most of both of their interests. The president agreed to double the marketing director's commission for six months. Even though the director wouldn't get cash immediately, he would quickly make money because the industry was picking up and his commission was doubled. The president got to keep his director; and, despite his paying him a double commission, he would reap plenty of profits, given the marketing director's huge incentive.

### Conclusion

Often a facilitator helps move people from their positions to joint problem-solving around their interests. By getting people to step back, listen, identify underlying interests and focus on the team's goals, the facilitator creates space to jointly identify inventive solutions. Conflicts aren't that hard to solve technically; what's difficult is managing individuals' feelings and reactions. Ultimately, conflicts are not solely problems to resolve; they provide opportunities for us to learn more about ideas, frameworks, ourselves and others. They also provide fertile ground for finding synergies among parties through which people can share resources, leverage their differences and create innovative solutions. By viewing and treating conflict as an opportunity for learning and innovation, organizations can potentially enhance employee satisfaction as well as individual, team and organizational productivity.

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