LEADERS RESOLVING CONFLICT IN MEETINGS

How do leaders in your organisation resolve conflict?

1. Think over last week and mentally review every instance of disagreement and conflict in the meetings you attended.

2. Were there any examples of unproductive disagreements? These are often the result of poorly run meetings. Maybe the agenda wasn't entirely clear or there were misunderstandings that could easily have been avoided.

3. Were there times when it would have been better to take things offline? Just going round and round isn't usually helpful.

4. Did you observe any examples of negotiating conflict? This is when it's right for a team to thoroughly explore competing views. What skills were used to manage this type of conversation?

5. Was authority ever used to shut down dissent? Was this appropriate? Did it work?

6. Were task and relationship balanced to maintain collegiality and good working relations in the team?

How leaders lead in real life

What is leadership? What constitutes 'leaderly' behaviour? These questions have preoccupied management writers for almost 50 years. A common modern definition of leadership concerns influencing others towards a common goal. But the methods used to probe what this amounts to in practice are usually quite narrow. For instance, data is generally drawn from interviews and questionnaires alone. This tends to stress attributes and high level descriptors, and it is frequently these that populate an organisation's frameworks and inform its development programs.

But leadership has to be 'performed', in the end. You have to 'do' leadership! Leaders have to draw on their personal repertoires of influence and communication skills in order to move people towards the outcomes and results that matter most.

The prime setting for such activities is a meeting. Meetings form the life blood of the modern organisation and there is a simple truth: organisations are essentially talked into being. Much of this talk requires leaders to influence a team that has to think together to solve a problem and make a sound decision. The context is often extremely complex and there can be a lot at stake. It's no surprise that disagreement often constitutes an important step on the way towards eventual agreement. Indeed, if there is *never* any disagreement or conflict, diversity of thought is constrained. As a result, innovation is almost impossible and the risk of making poor quality decisions increases. If well-managed, conflict can be highly productive.

How do real leaders manage these typical challenges?

If we combine recorded (usually filmed) data collected by UGM here in Australia with similar UK and NZ data, we now have almost 3000 interactions showing how leaders run typical meetings. The first thing that is quite is striking is that dramatic, head-on conflicts are very rare. People generally don't thump tables and shout at each other! Good leaders understand that they need to stimulate the open airing of diverging views, progress conversations towards task goals and, at the same time, maintain good collegial relations in the team. It's not easy to strike the right balance, especially when differences, for example of personality, gender and culture, are thrown into the mix. The findings show that well-regarded leaders have a sophisticated conflict skill set that goes from least to most confrontational.

Avoiding conflict

There was strong evidence in our data that good meeting protocols help leaders avoid quite a lot of unproductive conflict. For example, it is a frustrating waste of time when misunderstandings arise simply because it isn't clear what the team needs to focus on. A clear agenda, summarising progress at intervals, clarifying meaning and stating decisions explicitly are all strategies the effective leaders in the corpus of data use to minimise the potential for unhelpful and unproductive conflict.

Diverting conflict

This involves moving the conflict off line where it can be dealt with more appropriately. For instance, well-regarded leaders are swift to identify when a team starts to waste time disagreeing about something where more information is what is needed, or more preparation, or perhaps some expert input. No useful purpose is served when the team isn't ready to work through their conflicting views.

Negotiating conflict

This requires the highest level conflict management skills. Effective leaders judge when the team needs to work carefully through their differences in order to reach consensus. Because of the effort and time involved, this approach is best reserved for important topics that will benefit from a thorough airing of views, without closing off competing positions too soon. In such situations, typically leaders work hard to get team members to state not just their views but the rationale behind them. Face needs and collegiality are carefully maintained, so that it's easier for people to make a concession, back down or allow themselves to be persuaded.

Using authority

If you hold some positional power, you can simply close off discussion by imposing your will. Conflicting views can be ignored or discounted. In the data sets, there are examples of leaders taking this route. It tends to be seen more often in hierarchical organisations with a somewhat competitive culture - the old 'command and control' style. In one meeting we recorded, Jim the most senior executive present, kept repeating "It's a no!" when dissenting views were expressed. But this is risky. Dissenting voices can be forcibly silenced but good will and motivation may be damaged along the way. A decision can be reached but how well will it be implemented?

Balancing task and relationship

Our data shows that most leaders understand the need to balance task and relationship when managing conflict. For these reasons, conflict is often resolved dynamically and with some care, over several speaking turns, or during the course of a longer meeting, or even over several meetings. Leaders take into account the culture of the organisation, the seriousness of the issue and the potential implications if things go wrong.