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The Good Fight

Use Productive Conflict to Get Your Team and Organization Back on Track

Liane Davey • Page Two © 2019 • 240 pages

Social Skills / Conflict Resolution

Take-Aways

- Avoiding conflict creates "conflict debt," which inhibits productivity.
- Conflict fosters healthy relationships and protects you from toxic ones.
- Overcome conflict avoidance by shifting your mind-set.
- Create open communication channels and build trusting relationships to prevent unnecessary conflicts.
- Solve problems by transforming potential adversaries into allies.
- Find alignment by validating perspectives that differ from your own.
- Clarify expectations, and inspire your team to perform better.
- Normalize dissent and disagreement to keep conflicts productive.

Recommendation

People tend to want to avoid conflict, but business strategist Liane Davey calls on leaders to foster more – not less – dissent within their teams. She believes conflict has many benefits, like fostering healthy relationships and inspiring higher levels of performance. By contrast, avoiding conflict accumulates "conflict debt," which prevents teams from working together effectively. Using a straightforward, clear voice, Davey offers valuable guidance in how to create everyday moments of productive conflict. Her strategies will help you strengthen your problem-solving skills.

Summary

Avoiding conflict creates "conflict debt," which inhibits productivity.

Many people believe conflict is a bad thing, but companies need healthy conflict to function well. Conflict is an essential component of nearly every organizational activity, including strategic planning, product management resource allocation, talent management and product design. People tend to avoid conflict, rather than take the time to explore opposing viewpoints and find resolutions. Organizations create conflict debt when they silence those with opposing views, ignore difficult conversations and stick to topics that feel safe. When conflict debt accumulates, it erodes trust and makes workers feel frustrated and disengaged. Studies reveal employee disengagement is a widespread problem that negatively affects the productive potential of roughly 68% of workers. By ignoring the skeptics within your organization, you also create a culture of cynicism and fail to anticipate risks.

> *"Conflict isn't bad for organizations: It's fundamental to them."*

Conflict debt can have other bad effects as well. For example, team leaders have to speak candidly with one another in order to determine which projects to prioritize and which to postpone or stop. When leaders fail to prioritize, they waste resources on less-important aspects of their business, and struggle to react quickly and decisively.

Avoiding conflict also creates innovation silos. Engineers may shut out members of other departments, such as marketing or sales, because they fear negative feedback. Sheltering your team from potentially valuable information – even if it slows the development process – and failing to debate ideas can waste time and resources.

The desire to avoid friction can prevent teams from working together effectively: Managers fail to deal with workers who lack the skills to do their jobs, or who engage in destructive behaviors that affect the team. Conflict debt also harms leaders on a personal level, as they experience chronic stress and fail to advocate for their needs.

Conflict fosters healthy relationships and protects you from toxic ones.

People are conflict averse when the thought of having tough conversations makes them uneasy. Dislike of conflict is natural. Prehistoric humans needed to get along with one another to survive threats, such as packs

of predators. Many people develop conflict aversion in early childhood. When you were growing up, adults may have made you feel it was rude to disagree. Many children learn to have an unhealthy relationship with those in power, because when they question authority figures, adults chastise them and silence their concerns.

> *"It's natural for you to be conflict averse; it's harmful if you allow yourself to become conflict avoidant."*

Conflict-avoidant adults fail to challenge their superiors, even when leaders' behavior is harmful, because they fear negative repercussions such as losing their jobs. Managers often pressure workers to be agreeable, and may label disagreeable people as poor team players. However, conflict is crucial, as it enables you to create healthy relationships and protect yourself from toxic ones. Don't let your natural conflict aversion turn to avoidance, lest you fail to advocate on behalf of yourself and those who depend on you. Instead of avoiding conflict, focus on compromise, which requires having difficult discussions to reach an agreement that satisfies multiple parties.

Overcome conflict avoidance by shifting your mind-set.

Your mind-set shapes your approach to conflict. Those who feel conflict is negative avoid having important conversations, while those who think dissent is necessary, but find it undesirable, will drop hints in hopes that people understand their points. Those who view conflict in a more positive light – seeing it as the key to understanding one another better and reaching better outcomes – approach issues with clarity and directness, and have the best results. Shifting your mind-set and regarding conflict as something positive for everyone involved will help you navigate challenging situations. Focus on being kind, not being nice: While sharing contrary opinions may not seem like a nice thing to do, embracing transparency and telling the truth is an act of kindness in the long term.

> *"Don't avoid conflicts for fear of triggering anger or tears. Old norms around decorum and professional demeanor aren't serving you anymore."*

Don't shy away from conflict when you see it happening in your workplace. Instead, ask yourself these questions: Do the people having the disagreement work at the same company? Is their behavior affecting your ability to do your job? Could this conflict negatively affect your partners, suppliers or customers? If the answer to any of these questions is yes, then you should get involved. You can offer those in disagreement a more objective perspective on the situation and help them reach an understanding.

Ignore dated norms that tell you professionals always suppress their emotional responses in the workplace. Don't be afraid to have discussions that trigger emotions in yourself and others – emotion can be a valuable indicator that something isn't right. Give yourself permission to respectfully disagree with your boss in situations where doing so could be beneficial. For example, if your boss gives you unclear instructions, ask for greater clarity. If your boss gives you a workload that's not feasible, speak up.

Create open communication channels and build trusting relationships to prevent unnecessary conflicts.

People often cause conflict when they lack an understanding of others' expectations, but act anyway. To prevent needless conflicts, create direct lines of communication with your co-workers. Build trusting relationships. Your colleagues will be more likely to trust you if they understand you and can predict your behavior. People also trust those they view as credible. Make yourself appear credible by sharing your thoughts on relevant issues or asking thoughtful questions that show people you value their input.

Build trust by demonstrating your reliability. Keep your colleagues abreast of your achievements as you get closer to your goals and deadlines. Be transparent about any challenges you're facing. Avoid actions that make others think you lack integrity, such as talking about colleagues behind their backs. Demonstrate your integrity with positive actions, such as admitting mistakes when you're wrong. Trust is often reciprocal: If you operate with positive assumptions, acting like you trust people before you actually do, this will make them more likely to trust you.

Solve problems by transforming potential adversaries into allies.

Try to nurture strong connections with your team. This way, you can approach differences of opinion together as allies, rather than adversaries.

"If you invest in creating a strong connection, and really trying to understand where your colleague is coming from, you'll find your adversary suddenly becomes your ally."

Consider three different types of information when you're having a disagreement:

1. **Facts** – While you might assume you can find a solution to a conflict using facts, people manipulate facts to support their own points of view and rationalize their behavior. Still, facts can provide valuable information if you know how to interpret them. Pay close attention to what your colleagues omit and what they choose to share, while determining which facts are actually false judgment.
2. **Feelings** – Emotions can reveal the sources of problems or conflicts. To suss out your colleagues' emotional states, analyze their body language, their pitch, tone and volume of voice, and their use of eye contact. Use feelings to guide your questions. If, for example, a colleague doesn't seem excited about a new development, probe to figure out why.
3. **Values** – Often, conflicts arise because of a mismatch of values. But people mask their biases by behaving as though they're really upset about specific issues.

Certain behaviors – such as always contradicting, questioning or upstaging colleagues – will harm your connections with them. Failing to validate your colleagues or comment on the things they share with you also triggers resistance to your ideas. Strengthen your connections by choosing your words with care, and staying aware of your tone of voice, body language and the physical setup of the room. For example, don't keep a large desk or table if you want to eliminate feelings of distance. Try having tough conversations with your colleagues in a relaxed environment.

Find alignment by validating perspectives that differ from your own.

To reach a solution when you disagree with someone, use the "Two Truths" strategy: Acknowledge that both of you could have correct but differing perspectives. Listen to and validate the other person's point of view. Then, share your own. Try to find a solution that serves both of your needs. Speak favorably of your colleague's idea, even if you disagree with his or her proposed solution.

The Two Truths strategy only works if you actually can agree with part of your colleague's point of view. If you can't find any aspect of the other person's argument that resonates with you – either because it goes against your conscience or all available evidence – try the "Impact" technique: If someone suggests a destructive or harmful solution, ask questions to help that person notice the flaws in the idea before exploring alternate options.

"The fundamental premise of the Two Truths is that the other person doesn't have to be wrong for you to be right. It's possible for both of your perspectives to be true."

If your colleague objects to your idea, claiming it would never work, soften his or her resistance by using the "Hypothetical" strategy. Validate the person's objection, and then ask him or her to imagine what your idea could look like if you could magically overcome the obstacles you've heard. Once your colleague starts thinking about the desirable outcome of your suggestion, he or she may be more likely to help you overcome potential barriers.

If multiple people are trying to find a solution to the same problem, use the "Common Criteria" approach: Ask everyone to share what they feel are the key components of a good solution, so you can find alignment on your shared goals. If you fail to reach a solution, don't attack the ideas of those who disagree with you. Instead, calmly acknowledge any misunderstandings between you and your differing priorities.

Clarify expectations, and inspire your team to perform better.

Your team members will work inefficiently and perform poorly if you don't clarify your expectations. Failing to set expectations wastes time, because you have to ask people to redo tasks. It creates conflict and frustration. Use the "U tool" to set expectations and prevent unnecessary conflict: Let team members know exactly what leaders at different levels of your company expect, both explicitly and implicitly, from their work.

"If everyone is clear on their role and the value they are expected to add, they will be less likely to disappoint, or be disappointed by, others in the group."

Use a U-shaped template: List what different levels of leadership expect at the planning and delegation stages on the left side of the page, and then describe the expectations in the drafting and revision stages of work on the bottom. Place the values that review and governing processes should add on the right side. Using this tool to define what good work looks like eliminates the need for bosses to micromanage employees or try to fix problems themselves. It prevents workers from taking shortcuts and bypassing the

different stages each task requires. Let your team know that even those who perform well should expect feedback, as you plan to critique everyone, even high performers.

Normalize dissent and disagreement to keep conflicts productive.

The key to keeping conflict productive lies in having more of it, not less. Normalize dissent by creating space each day for small disagreements. Creating habitual moments of productive conflict reduces both the stress and the stakes of disagreement. When you make productive conflict a habit, your team members learn to manage their emotions and stop acting defensive, while reaching solutions more quickly and effectively.

> *"By adding a little productive conflict to each day, you'll wind up with fewer unpleasant, unproductive conflicts in the long run."*

Give your team feedback on the basis of observation, rather than judgment. Rather than presuming that you know people's thoughts, motivations or feelings, share how their behaviors made you feel or affected you on a subjective level. Several other habits to encourage positive moments of conflict include using humor to create a lighthearted atmosphere, and expressing gratitude to people for their candor and openness when they share differing viewpoints.

About the Author

Liane Davey, is the author of the *New York Times* bestseller *You First*. A public speaker and a business strategist, she earned a doctorate in organizational psychology from the University of Waterloo.

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