NEGOTIATION

Productive Conflict Management:

Your Approach, Norms and Practices, and the Role of the Leader

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Conflict is inevitable. Whether it is feared and suppressed or welcomed as a source of innovation depends on the approaches, norms, and leadership around it.

1. What Is Your Approach to Conflict?

In situations involving more than one person, some conflict is inevitable, whether expressed or not. In families, friendship groups, personal or professional partnerships, teams, and more complex organizations there are conflicting needs, vested interests, goals, and preferences. In some venues these conflicts are feared, suppressed, and avoided. In others, they are welcomed and can lead to innovation and positive change. As a leader, your attitude toward conflict will guide those who follow you to treat it as an opportunity to be explored or a disturbance to be ignored, if possible.

There are many approaches to dealing with conflict[1]. By culture, training, and experience, there are usually some that we prefer over others. Not all approaches are equally effective. Below is a list of some common options for dealing with conflict and their descriptions. Consider which approaches you typically use and the potential positive and/or negative consequences for each.

NINE COMMON APPROACHES TO CONFLICT

- **Confront:** Let the other know directly how his or her action has affected you and/or what you plan to do about it.
- **Stuff:** Let the issue pass for now but keep it in mind and act accordingly.
- **Dialogue:** Seek a common understanding of the issues that led up to the conflict.
- **Retaliate:** Plan and take actions that even the balance between you and the other party.
- **Problem-solve:** Search for a logical solution that will resolve the conflict.
- **Triangle:** Talk about the conflict with a third party without letting the other person know about it.
- **Avoid:** Withdraw from the conflict situation or relationship without discussing the issue.

- **Negotiate:** Initiate a process of fair exchange that will meet the needs of both parties to the conflict.
- **Let go:** Let the issue pass, consciously and intentionally, without allowing it to affect the relationship.

More than likely, you use several of these, depending on the situation – but you are probably aware that some are more productive than others. These behaviors include confronting, creating a dialogue, problem-solving, negotiating, and (at times) letting go. Team and/or organization members will each have their own default approaches, productive or less so.

2. Norms and Practices

Norms for productive conflict resolution

Establishing some explicit norms and demonstrating these approaches publicly can help create an environment in which productive conflict behaviors are seen as desirable and are practiced. Some "rules of the road," if communicated, agreed upon, and reinforced, can help shape the way individuals and groups perform in potential or actual conflict situations. These norms may include:

- Be clear about your own goals, vested interests (what you might gain or lose), and/or needs related to the conflict situation.
- Ask questions, draw out, and listen actively to learn about others' positions, concerns, vested interests, and needs.
- If any party has specific fears, concerns, or negative expectations related to the conflict, raise and deal with them early to establish an atmosphere conducive to negotiation and/or peacemaking.
- Identify areas of agreement or shared values.
- Agree on a process for resolution and identify the parties who should participate.
- Deal directly with the person or group with whom you are in conflict (or ask an agreed-upon third party to work with all parties to resolve it).

Practices for productive conflict resolution: Negotiation, peacemaking, or problem-solving?

- If there is a set of common interests as well as conflicting ones, use the principles and process of constructive negotiation,[2] including establishing shared goals, exploring needs and interests, developing alternative options to meet one another's needs, and agreeing on responsibilities and timelines for taking actions.
- If there are few common interests, and numerous fears and concerns, take a peacemaking approach in which the parties (usually with the help of a trusted third party) tackle each concern and find a way to resolve it to the satisfaction of all.
- If there are significant common interests and fewer conflicting ones, take a problem-solving approach, seeking to come up with a creative alternative solution that all parties can accept.

Whichever approach you decide to take, concentrate on resolving the most important issues. If some issues are difficult to resolve, consider whether the parties are willing to let go and live with issues that are of relatively low concern to them. Make sure all parties are satisfied that their most important issues have been resolved; their most important needs met.

Remember to check for understanding and agreement on the issues discussed, then summarize the agreements and communicate them to those who may be affected. Take time to consider what you have learned in the process and find a

way to celebrate productive agreements (those that lead to improved relationships, innovations, important learnings, etc.).

3. The Role of the Leader

As a leader, you will often be called upon to intervene in conflict situations. Here are a few things NOT to do under those circumstances:

> **WHAT NOT TO DO**
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> - Don't accept the ownership of the conflict situation if you have not been directly involved. In many conflict situations, the parties are able to and should be encouraged to resolve it themselves.
> - Don't decide and communicate who is right and who is wrong or impose a solution.
> - Don't accept an invitation to be a third party if you have any vested interests in the outcome – instead, invite an outsider to take the role of facilitator or mediator.

Some things you can do to establish a productive environment for the management and resolution of conflict include:

- Talk openly about your own experiences with a constructive approach to conflict resolution – or its opposite.
- Provide a safe forum for discussing differences and encourage people to express and explore these differences openly. In meetings, ask for and encourage ideas that are different from current practices and common wisdom without agreeing or disagreeing.
- If you can reasonably do so, offer to act as a neutral "sounding board" for all parties where you can help them explore and articulate their goals and needs.
- Reinforce and demonstrate how conflict, handled productively, can improve the quality of ideas and decisions and lead to better solutions.

You, as a leader, can create and sustain an environment where challenging and innovative ideas can flourish and where individuals can learn, grow, and build strong relationships by making conflict a tool for development and innovation rather than a situation to be avoided, hidden, or used in a manipulative and destructive way.

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NOTES

[1] Some material adapted and used with permission from Conflict: From Prevention to Resolution, a copyrighted Barnes & Conti program.

[2] Some material adapted with permission from Constructive Negotiation and From Conflict to Consensus, copyrighted programs of Barnes & Conti Associates, Inc.

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Founder of **The Influence Guru**, Kim Barnes is a coach, facilitator, and author with more than forty years of experience in leadership, influence, and organization development. She was a founder and, for many years, CEO of Barnes & Conti Associates, and developed or co-developed programs including *Exercising Influence*, *Inspirational Leadership*, *Intelligent Risk-Taking*, *Consulting on the Inside*, and *Managing Innovation*. She is the author of six books, including *Exercising Influence* (Wiley) and *Building Better Ideas* (Berrett-Koehler). She works with enterprise companies, government agencies, small businesses, and individuals from the San Francisco Bay Area.

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