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Resolving Conflict

Healthy conflict v unhealthy conflict

How to harness conflict for the power of good

In this article we discover the differences between healthy and unhealthy conflict and how control is at the heart of the unhealthy kind; we share ways to tame or inflame a situation, and we explore what it means to have conflict in a coaching culture.

Conflict is an integral part of human communication, and yet it is something that people struggle with the most. When harnessed effectively, conflict can be the impetus for new breakthroughs and higher energy, yet it can also bring a relationship, or a whole organisation, to a halt. These are the extremes and there are many variations in between.

'Healthy' conflict requires an atmosphere of trust in which people can safely speak their minds. They need to know that job prospects will not be damaged by disagreeing with the boss and that everyone will be listened to and treated with respect. This type of atmosphere builds strong and sustainable relationships both at work and at home.

'Unhealthy' conflict can arise through fear, bullying and deceit, leading to resentments or the type of rows which cause lasting damage to the fabric of relationships. This can result in people resigning or being fired, and the collapse of what might have become successful projects.

Control

Why should it feel dangerous to speak our minds when we disagree with someone? Conflict often arises from a fear of losing control that goes back to primitive times, when our brains were formed in a world where it might mean the difference between life and death – freezing without shelter, perhaps, or being eaten by an animal.

All too often, when we feel control slipping away in the workplace today, it feels like a life or death situation all over again. Panic sets in, the primeval responses of flight, flight or freeze take over, and the blood drains from our heads to our legs, in readiness to run, which leaves us less able to think clearly just when we need it the most.

Choice

We cannot choose every situation but what is always within our grasp is to choose how we respond to it. The philosopher Viktor Frankl's writings about having the power to choose one's reaction, however hopeless the situation may be, are not only inspiring but provide first class life advice:

'Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way. Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.' – Viktor E. Frankl, *'Man's Search for Meaning'*

The words we choose can either inflame the situation or calm it.

We can use inflammatory language, which is subjective, critical, judgemental, and features fixed words and phrases:

You make me
It's your fault
 You always
You're stupid

Or we can employ uninflamatory language, which is objective, neutral and frequently asks permission:

When you said 'xxx' I felt 'yyy'
Could we ...?
If we ...?
 Taking responsibility

When people state opinions which differ, there is a tendency for each to become entrenched in their own view. Before long, winning the argument becomes the most important issue, and both sides find themselves unable to consider any new information which might change their views.

A good question to ask ourselves when we start to get caught up in the heat of conflict is:



Marshal Rosenberg

Marshal Rosenberg's book 'Nonviolent Communication' theorises that conflict often arises because people have needs which are not being met. When our needs are not met we might experience feelings of being angry, anxious, afraid, bored, confused, disappointed, discouraged, embarrassed, frustrated, hopeless, impatient, irritated, insecure, jealous, lonely, lost, nervous, overwhelmed, reluctant, sad, tense, uncomfortable, vulnerable, or worried.

But when our needs are met, we can feel amazed, alert, brave, calm, content, confident, enthusiastic, eager, glad, happy, hopeful, inspired, optimistic, proud, peaceful, relaxed, strong, satisfied, and stimulated.



Some useful questions to ask oneself in situations like this are:

- What are my needs in the situation?
- In what ways are my needs not being met?
- How does that make me feel?
- In what ways are my needs being met?
- How does that make me feel?
- What sort of behaviour are my needs causing in me?
- What sort of behaviour are my needs causing in other people?
- What effect are my needs having on the situation?
- What other needs might I have which are not so obvious?
- What are *other people's needs in the situation*?
- How could everyone's needs be met? What compromises are possible?*
- What strategies could ensure that everyone's needs are met?*

It is possible to make people do things in many ways, including through the fear of punishment or the hope for a reward – or purely because they want to. People perform better when their reason is the latter, hence the need to motivate people rather than simply bully or reward them:

'The objective of getting what we want from people or getting them to do what we want threatens the autonomy of people ... whenever people feel they are not free to choose, they are likely to resist. Through threat or application of punishment, or the promise of giving a reward, we try to influence someone to do something – whether that be a task or behaviour. Both reward and punishment are control over others; in that respect, reward comes out of the same thinking as punishment.' – Marshall Rosenberg

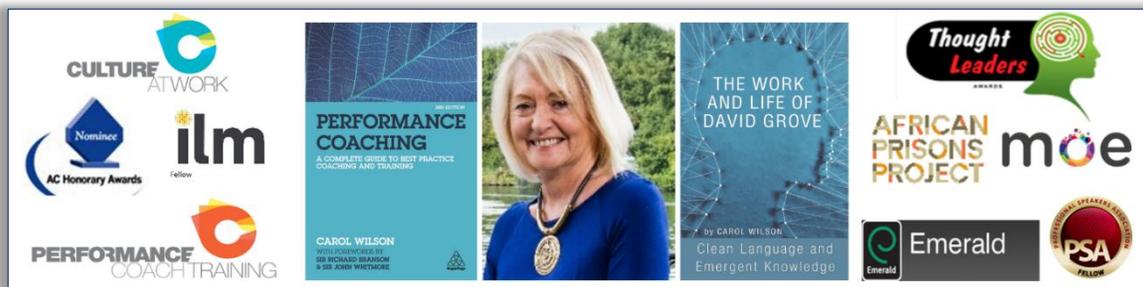
Conflict in a coaching culture

Coaching cultures are by no means conflict-free zones and nor is it desirable that they should be. Healthy conflict can result in meetings that are exciting and passionate events which give rise to original thinking, creativity and high levels of motivation. Conflict is nothing to be afraid of and its energy can be harnessed for the good of the individual, team, organisation, or family.

References

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About the author



International speaker, writer and broadcaster Carol Wilson is Managing Director of Culture at Work and a Fellow of the Institute of Leadership & Management, the Professional Speaking Association and the Association for Coaching, where she is a member of the Global Advisory Panel. A cross-cultural expert, she designs and delivers programmes to create coaching cultures for corporate and public sector organisations worldwide and has won awards for coaching and writing. She is the author of *'Performance Coaching: A Complete Guide to Best Practice Coaching and Training'*, now in its third edition and featuring Forewords by Sir Richard Branson and Sir John Whitmore, and *'The Work and Life of David Grove: Clean Language and Emergent Knowledge'*. She has contributed to several other books and published over 60 articles including a monthly column in Training Journal.