



## **Conflict: Is it good for business?**

Do you avoid conflict and difficult conversations at work? Well you're not alone. Unfortunately though, you're missing out on something that could really improve performance. Chris Baxter describes how to engage in conflict without losing your temper...

### **Why do we need conflict?**

Global competition, e-commerce, skills shortages, and increasing red tape have highlighted the imperative of continuous change in business. Piled on top of these forces for change we now have to contend with an economic slowdown, shrinking markets, and downward price pressure. To carry on business as usual in these circumstances would surely spell disaster.

Productive conflict is the best way to stir up impassioned debate about the real issues, and to bring forward radical ideas that drive a quantum leap in performance. Compromise by way of contrast causes us to give up on interesting, exciting and radical ideas so that what we're left with are decisions that are distinctive only because they produce little meaningful change.

Unfortunately understanding the need for change and having an appetite for it are two quite different concepts, as many would prefer that change was something that happened around them, rather than to them.

### **But don't most people dislike conflict?**

Yes mostly people recoil at the word "conflict" as it usually conjures up images of frayed tempers, angry words, heated arguments and damaged relationships. We are, after all, a pretty reserved and introverted bunch and the majority of people prefer to avoid contentious issues and the possibility of conflict. But that's because we don't know that there are two types of conflict:

- Productive conflict, and
- Destructive conflict

### **So what is destructive conflict?**

In a bad argument (destructive conflict) the debate is contaminated by things like hidden agendas, competition, self-protection, fear and pride. The participants are focussed on themselves and their needs, rather than what's best for the team. In destructive conflict people tend to personalise the argument by saying things like:

- "I disagree with you..." or
- "You're wrong..."

Time and again I've seen these kind of statements ignite tempers and emotions leading to defensiveness and counter-attacks. Whether those personalised comments are meant that way or not is irrelevant, because that's the way they are perceived.

### **What else characterises destructive conflict?**

Bad arguments are usually no better than a battle of opinions and it's impossible to hold a productive debate if we're just battling opinions back and forth. Let me give you an example: Newcastle United is a much better football club than Sunderland: fact or opinion? Well that depends on which your side of the fence. When two opposing football supporters "discuss" the merits of their preferred team, neither side is really listening, and uses the time when their combatant is speaking to construct their next retort or accusation. All of which is a bit too much like an argument between finance and sales on the reasons why profits are down.



### **So what is productive conflict?**

My dictionary defines conflict as *“an active disagreement between people with opposing opinions or principles”*, and there’s nothing in that definition about hurt feelings, angry words and all that other negative stuff.

Productive conflict is characterised by respect for each others’ point-of-view and a patient, in-depth exploration of the real issues. People involved in productive conflict seek to understand their colleagues’ point-of-view before explaining their own, and they ask questions to identify the validity the information and assumptions others’ opinions are based on. When they explain their own point-of-view they also take the time to ensure that they are fully understood. Consequently the discussion filters out flawed assumptions and misinformation meaning that the decisions made are justifiable and benefit from unanimous support.

### **What’s involved in learning how to do productive conflict?**

Firstly you have to look at the way you debate issues now and find out whether it is unproductive and is hurting your business. If discussions in your business mostly resemble opinion table tennis resulting in decisions that are not carried through, you are not likely to be improving fast enough to keep ahead of your competition. The second step is to find someone who can help you with this. Learning these new behaviours and habits is very difficult without the input of an objective and skilled facilitator who can spot your bad habits and show you how to learn better ones.

© Christopher D Baxter 2009