

STORMING



Conflict is an inevitable outcome of the fact that each human being thinks for him/herself. By paying attention to mood or tone, managers keep conflict from getting out of hand.

Employee conflict is present in all great companies. It is the nature of talented individuals to see the world from a unique perspective - one that challenges the boundaries of conventional wisdom. Put a roomful of people like this together, and it is easy to ignite spirited discourse. Add to that discourse someone's entrenched ideas about the "right way" to do the job, and the conversation can easily escalate into a shouting match. Then, when the discussion turns to who gets which resources, mayhem may result.

What are the consequences? Grudges are formed that last for years. Functional lines harden. Senior leaders stop talking with one another. Employees protect their turf. Communication stops. It's no wonder that business people view conflict the same way engineers view resistance: as something to be avoided or eliminated. Just as friction generates heat, drains operating power from a motor, and causes wear and tear, so people recognize that conflict paralyzes decision-making, wastes time, and produces blizzards of "CYA" e-mails.

Recently a client called a "Summit Meeting" of its top 50 managers to address the heat that was building from perceived discord. Statements like these were typical:

"We have not created a safe and objective environment for escalation of issues and areas for improvement and are subject to swirl, panic, and general CYA behavior."

"We are not honest in our communications. People are afraid to take an opposing stand even when it is based on fact."

"We make commitments without understanding the impact."

Does this sound familiar? This company is no different from your own. People want to work in a supportive environment. They instinctively know that a positive tone improves everyone's productivity. But somehow strife begins to take root, often growing from a tiny seed. And unless people counter it, disharmony spreads like weeds in the garden, strangling its beauty.

What is that seed? More importantly, how can we go about weeding the garden before the growth gets out of hand?

As we've discussed before, it's hard to see eye to eye because we all create our own reality from the ceaseless flow of our own thinking. No two people have thoughts that are exactly alike, any more than any two snowflakes have the same structure. This fact is so obvious that it is often overlooked; yet this diversity of thought is an inescapable part of being human. Conflicts arise from strongly held beliefs; people are holding tightly to different "right answers." These answers bind us to the past and make it difficult to see how to do something new in the present. It's not that people are in conflict per se but rather that their thoughts are in the state of dissonance.

For example, there was a budget meeting at my firm that, like many high-stakes sessions, was marked by a great deal of verbal strife. Opinions diverged widely over which should take priority: investment for a future payout or a larger bonus right now. At the end of the session, we asked each participant to describe how he or she was feeling and were dumbfounded by the range of responses - from puzzled, angry, or betrayed all the way to relieved, cheerful, and even peaceful. Had these people attended the same meeting?

This is human thinking in action. Conflict is an inevitable consequence of our ability to think for ourselves. Conflict becomes entrenched when we forget that its seed is "just a thought" and that we can change our thoughts as easily as we can pull out a weed. Like weeds our negative thinking takes over only if we forget that we are the gardeners - fully capable of observing our thoughts and seeing which are to be nurtured and which are to be weeded out.

The problems originate in thoughts like, "I know I'm right. Why don't they listen to me?" "Why should I mention it? No one will do anything about it," "That department is out to make our lives miserable," "I don't trust him," "They are just trying to shift the blame onto us," "He never does what he says he is going to do," "I'll just ignore their request; I'm too busy anyway," or "I'm just not going to answer; I don't work for them."

This kind of thinking yields a negative tone, and it's that tone that gives us clues to the quality of our thinking. In other words, it's not the content of our thought but our feelings that cause us to notice negativity. Feelings are the clues to our state of mind, to the quality of our thinking process. We notice first the emotional negativity associated with pessimistic thinking. Anger. Resentment. Weariness. Fear. Stress. Bother. Anxiety. Worry. Self-righteousness. These are the feelings that feed conflict and strife.

But these negative outcomes are not inevitable. By paying attention to our feelings, we can stifle the weed as soon as it pokes its head out of the ground. However, if we focus solely on our thought content, we are likely to find more justification for further entrenching our original thought.

When we notice our tone, our feelings, we get a clue, a clue that reminds us that we are the thinker - in other words, that we have a choice about which thoughts to heed and which to ignore. That knowledge gives us the power to let go of negativity by turning our backs on thoughts that feed it.

When we remember that our thoughts are always flowing, we realize that we actually don't have to "do" anything to change the tone of our thinking. If we just get out of our own way, that negative thought will be followed by a new thought and then another and another. When we let go of our thinking, we also let go of the past, of our ego. We are open to the novelty of whatever comes to mind, fresh in the present moment. Then we are free to act on those thoughts that give us feelings of being connected, lighthearted, happy, warm, comfortable, easy-going, relaxed, kind, surprised, intrigued, engaged.

This may sound great for our personal lives, when we are with our families or on vacation, but what about when we are "at work"? Are you concerned that everyone will just sit around feeling good and doing nothing? That is why so many leaders think it's a good thing to stress the organization; they link stress to motivation. But doesn't it make more sense for leaders to focus on setting stretch goals and then working to keep the feelings positive so that people can do their best work? From this view, the more we get along with one another and enjoy our work, the more easily we will reach our targets and accomplish substantial results.

So isn't it the case that the more difficult the goal, the more challenging the assignment, the shorter the time, the more rigorous the solution, the greater the need for people to do their very best? When is that more likely to happen - when we are feeling good or when we are feeling stressed out?

Great leaders know that establishing and nurturing a constructive tone is job number one. And even when our leaders inadvertently take us off track, the more readily we can acknowledge that we are the thinkers, the more capable we become of tending to our "patch of turf" and keeping things from getting out of hand. The neighbor's lawns look great. Even the recalcitrant homeowner's front yard looks better than it otherwise would; for when he procrastinates, his shaggy lawn sticks out like a sore thumb. Have you ever tried to hold onto negative, egocentric thoughts in the face of lighthearted banter or warmth? It feels foolish, just as when we stubbornly refuse to cut our lawn.

The Summit Meeting held by the client mentioned earlier was characterized by a constructive tone. It generated numerous creative suggestions about how to normalize working relationships and solve some very sticky near-term issues. Listen to how some of the managers committed themselves to changing their behavior:

- I will provide a comfortable environment.
- I will work towards better teamwork, trust, clarity and understanding - the feeling of being connected, that we are all in this together.
- I will give teammates the benefit of doubt - instead of blaming them.
- I will work at getting to know everyone in this meeting - so that I can see my staff as people.
- I will presume innocence - by not taking my assumptions seriously.
- I will stay focused on curiosity - that helps me listen

- I will be collaborative.
- I will be open to listening, instead of jumping to conclusions.
- I will pick up the phone more often so that I can make a human connection.
- I will focus on issues and not engage in personal blame.
- I will say thank you more often.

Thoughts like these will strengthen the interpersonal dimension of how this client goes about its work. It will be impossible for them not to create a constructive tone, for feelings like appreciation are the mother's milk of effective relationships and outstanding results. In time these feelings will give this company a distinctive quality that is apparent to everyone - from the rawest new hire to the most crotchety veteran.

In time, they will be known for gracefully accomplishing the impossible and, in so doing, transcending all yardsticks of conventional performance.

For more information email Partners@AccompliGroup.com