

Relationship: The Forgotten R

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We learned about the three Rs in school, but it seems the critical fourth R – *Relationship Management*, was forgotten. Whether we like it or not, conflict is a natural part of life, and managing it is very important for long term outcomes for all involved. Handled destructively, it results in emotional strain, mistrust and lost productivity. Handled constructively, it promotes growth, problem solving and better decisions. Whether conflict is a single disagreement or persistent differences in opinion, it is important to resolve it constructively.

"Relationship management creates commitment and collaboration and can be an effective driver of positive change."

Resolving differences constructively is a key leadership skill.

Because constructive conflict optimizes decision making and strengthens relationships, it is in your best interest to foster constructive opposition in your teams. Successful organizations are those that rely, in part, on the voices able to ask the difficult questions, to raise the unspeakable issues, and to work together productively to sort out solutions that will last. It is also important to distinguish healthy conflict from destructive conflict. The truth is, the difference between constructive and destructive conflict is that with constructive conflict, no one's feelings are hurt, the focus is on the task instead of on the person, and ideas are generated not shut down.

So, how is this done?

Invite the devil's advocate.

Encourage your team members to play devil's advocate to each other. By allowing them to safely take opposing viewpoints, they learn that it's ok to share their differences. But it's all in the way that it's done. If you make sure that no one is seen as wrong or "bad" for questioning or contributing a contrasting view of the issue, then an environment that supports healthy conflict should result.

Open it up.

It is critical to create a safe, trusting and respectful environment where folks can open up and say what's on their mind without fear of being ousted, criticized or judged. The purpose of fostering constructive conflict is to have everyone put their cards on the table, regardless of their role or place in the hierarchy. Ideas may be refuted or countered, but they should not be silenced. How else will divergent thinking and varied perspectives be discovered?

Bring it out.

Once people know that they can disagree safely, find out what the conflict is about and talk about it – all of it. The sensitive issues must be dealt with sensitively, but they must be dealt with. The best decisions are made when all bases have been explored, no matter how against the grain they may be.

Make it ok.

How leaders respond to conflict will influence how willing employees are to engage in healthy debate. Managers need to welcome disagreement, not see it as a challenge to their authority. By practicing good conflict management and not sending the message that "dissenters will be dealt with", managers can help to cultivate a constructive conflict environment.



Slow down.

With the pace of business these days, “getting on with it” is the norm. However, if problem solving, decision making and conflict resolution are to be done right, they need to be done at a pace that engages those involved. These activities take time to become part of the organizational culture; but they may save the time it takes to re-examine a bad decision or to heal a damaged relationship.

It's important that while resolving conflict that an opportunity exists for individuals to clarify expectations, build cohesiveness and create a productive, problem solving atmosphere. It is difficult, but not impossible to totally eliminate the kind of destructive conflict that hinders teamwork and achievement; that's why constructive conflict is so important to foster. It creates commitment and collaboration and can be an effective driver of positive change.

Remember to focus on issues, not on personalities. Constructive conflict is about repairing damaged relationships and aims to keep relationships in tact through the conflict process. This can only be accomplished by being open, transparent and having meaningful dialogue.

Links:

http://www.sideroad.com/Team_Building/conflict-in-workplace.html

<http://www.nd.gov/hrms/employees/conflict.html>

