Conflict Keeps Teams at the Top of Their Game

by Mark de Rond

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Managers often worry about conflict in their teams, afraid that any sign of trouble will undermine performance. A typical response to conflict is to ignore it — to avoid getting to the root of the problem and hope that it will somehow go away. In our MBA program we call these "cappuccino teams": Every time conflict rears its ugly head, people break for coffee, presumably in the hope that it will help restore harmony. It may be a nice way to handle conflict, but it isn't particularly effective. Instead, managers need to know how to create teams that feel psychologically safe enough for conflicting opinions to be aired and the benefits of diversity exploited.

What few people seem to realize is that even the most effective teams will feel conflict-prone at times. And there are good reasons for this. Teams composed of high-performing individuals are naturally subject to contradictory tensions, like cooperation and rivalry, trust and vigilance. These tensions should not be managed away — they are productive and can help teams perform better.

For instance, rivalry within a team helps weed out inefficiencies and — however uncomfortable it may feel at times — also keeps people at the top of their game. Besides, high performers are naturally competitive and to not allow them to express their competitive nature is to deny them something that is very much part of who they are. And this can make the team feel psychologically unsafe.

So here are three ways to become more comfortable with team conflict.

First, be careful not to confuse what things *feel* like with what they really *are* like. What feels dysfunctional may, for all practical purposes, be perfectly effective. Remember that any conflict feels awkward — "healthy" conflict feels no less uncomfortable for being "healthy". Contrary to popular belief, harmony in teams is far more likely to be the consequence — and not the cause — of performance. In fact, the best way to bond team members may well be to set them a challenge — to give them something to feel good about collectively.

Second, be creative. Take the example of Colonel Stas Preczewski, in charge of a dysfunctional US Army rowing team at West Point. He was faced with an ineffective and conflict-ridden crew. Figuring that the root of the conflict was lack of trust, he had his rowers line up and wrestle each other in pairs. The exercise, albeit very risky in that it could have caused serious injury, made each teammate realize just how physically strong and how competitive they all were. When it came to their next big race, they performed far better than they ever had in practice. The conflict the Colonel faced was potentially corrosive. Conflict that can be generative is based on differences of opinion.

And this brings me to my third piece of advice. **Remind your team that these differences of opinion are both inevitable and useful.** Invariably, when you put together a team you force people to work with others who will annoy them from time to time. Conflicting opinions are important not only because they smoke out assumptions and enlarge the pool of available information, but because they reveal what matters most to those involved. So explain that any annoyances are likely to be a natural consequence of diversity, and that diversity is precisely what's required for the team to succeed.

Finally, if only organizations would spend as much time and effort on making their teams feel "psychologically safe" as they currently do on instructing people to be "team players", they would likely be far better off as a result. In workplaces where people self-censor for fear of being perceived as negative or incompetent or "not a team player", collaboration will not come as naturally. Human beings are social animals. And so our

priorities may have been wrong all along. We must focus on creating safe spaces for people to express themselves and take risks. If we do this well, teamwork will be a no-brainer by comparison.

Mark de Rond is an associate professor of Strategy and Organization at the Judge Business School, University of Cambridge. His new book, *There is an I in Team*, published by HBR Press, challenges conventional wisdom about teams in business by adapting lessons from the world of sports, along with new insights from the latest social and psychological research.

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