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Disagree To Agree: Why Conflict Can Be Good For the Workplace

By

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Clashing opinions and a degree of conflict can make your team more effective, says **Christopher Shen.**

Most managers strive to create organisations that resemble the Brady Bunch. They would like all discussions to exhibit cooperation, compromise, trust, respect, and naive optimism rather than conflict, discord, or disagreement. But even after 117 episodes, Cindy never learned to speak properly, Marcia never found a suitable partner, and Alice never received a promotion. And, according to a multitude of studies, organisations that stifle conflict and disputes will receive the same fate: stagnancy, frustration, and ultimately oblivion.

I have found that workgroups in which employees are unduly obliging and kind towards one another tend to be more cynical, suspicious and insincere. Some employees strive vigorously to minimise conflict. They attempt to appease one another. If ever they disagree with their peers, or disapprove of their managers, they will usually repress their opposition altogether. But frustrations that are suppressed tend to become more intense and bitter over time. Employees thus become increasingly resentful of one another, which ultimately undermines trust, respect and satisfaction with the workgroup.

Indeed, employees often evade the colleagues they disapprove of, and this evasion has been demonstrated scientifically to disrupt their concentration, curb their motivation, and compromise their performance. Employees who feel the urge to minimise conflict typically shun the individuals with whom they disagree. They do not socialise or interact or even converse with these individuals. Regrettably, research reveals that employees who shun their colleagues – who evade interactions – typically work less efficiently, diligently, and productively. Their urge to shun their colleagues has been proven to divert attention from their work and undermine their performance.

In contrast, workgroups that actively encourage employees to express their opposition regularly tend to be more innovative and effective. In some workgroups, employees are compelled to challenge the opinions and practices of one another. They are encouraged to contest the beliefs and behaviours of their colleagues. Through this process, a diversity of opinion will be uncovered; a variety of concerns and issues will be unearthed. To reconcile these divergent opinions, concerns and issues, employees unwittingly identify fresh, novel and creative solutions. In other words, employees who challenge one another engage in innovative, effective strategies. They are not constrained by traditional practices or by outdated conventions.

In addition, these employees feel confident that all problems can be addressed and all concerns can be solved. And so they do not become especially stressed when difficulties and obstacles arise.

Dr Simon Moss, senior lecturer in psychology at Monash University, believes this inclination to minimise conflict and disagreement pervades many unions and employee associations as well. “In the past, many unions were perceived as militant, aggressive outfits. As a consequence, undue mistrust and hostility between unions and management stalled negotiations and hampered progress. Unions seldom realised their goals. So to compensate, many unions attempted to form cooperative, supportive and trusting relationships with management,” he says.

This collaborative approach, however, has severely dented the power and impact of many unions. As Moss asserts: “Many unions are now too eager to accommodate the demands of management. Such unions tend to be less, rather than more, effective. They tend to secure fewer benefits to their members. For example, according to scientific studies, members of unions or employee associations that never threaten to strike are less likely to receive provisions such as training and development programs. Management simply does not feel compelled to accommodate the needs of these employees.”

Employees and managers who recruit individuals also prefer applicants who are submissive, deferential and obliging. These applicants, lamentably, tend to be less creative and innovative. They tend to exhibit less insight and initiative. “Recruiters prefer job applicants who have seldom, if ever, participated in disputes. They prefer applicants who have never even been exposed to conflict,” says Moss. “And yet, candidates who have been exposed to many disputes – or were reared in families in which the parents opposed, contradicted and confronted one another incessantly – are more likely to develop a capacity to offer creative insights. Exposure to conflicting opinions and contradictory perspectives has been shown to cultivate the ability to uncover original solutions and solve intractable problems.”

Nodding your head will only lead to a sore neck. Organisations need to reward employees who challenge established practices, even if such individuals do create a few headaches along the way.

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