What's Your Conflict Management Plan?

We all know (at least in our more honest moments) that conflict is an unavoidable fact of life. Most of us then adopt a strategy of putting up with conflict, and the way we do that is usually by avoiding it.

The thing is, a group of high performers will experience more conflict than other groups. They will have strong ideas and opinions that differ. If their strategy is to avoid conflict, then either they will just go off on their own, or they will begin to undermine and sabotage one another. Either way, the group is deprived of direct contributions and that unique energy that comes only when people are creating together. These high performers might even leave to find a more receptive environment.

What's the answer? Develop a plan for managing and learning from conflict.

It might look something like this: When the team gets together say, "We know we are a group of high performers, and we all have lots to contribute. We also know that we won't always agree. What are your ideas for some ground rules we can use when that happens? After all, we all want to do a really good job together." Then list all these ideas on a large sheet of chart paper. Boil it down to the essential ground rules, and leave it up on the wall of the place where you usually meet.

Here's the trick. The first time you feel a conflict or disagreement coming on, point to the list on the wall. This may sound easy, but in the moment it can be awfully hard to remember to do. Drawing attention to the list changes the frame of reference for the team. They can feel good about using their own ground rules. And, you can all understand that you have finally encountered what you all knew you would: productive disagreement!

After using the ground rules, at the end of the meeting or discussion, change the frame of reference once again. Ask the group, "How can we refine these ground rules in light of our experience just now?" People will once again have a say in how the group manages disagreement and tension. Best of all, no one will be avoiding the issue, merely hoping it will go away.

Some potential ground rules might include:

- No personal attacks.
- Focus on the problem, not the person.
- All opinions are valid.
- Focus on underlying interests, not the surface positions.
- Make "I" statements.
- No "you" statements.
- Say "and" instead of "but."
- No interrupting.
- No long speeches.
- Focus on creative solutions, not mere accommodations.
- All group members must speak up; silence is not OK.
- Restate the solution or agreement at the end and ask for any opposition.
- Set a timetable (knowing that the issue might not be resolved quickly).
- Separate on-going dilemmas from problems that can be permanently solved.

While these particular ground rules might be helpful, the important thing here is that the group itself develops its own ground rules. We all do better when we follow rules we ourselves have created.

Conflict and tension will always be with us. In fact, we should worry (a lot!) if things are too peaceful; it probably means important issues are being driven underground and the group isn't achieving to its full potential. Research has shown that groups of high performers will experience more conflict than other groups.

An intentional conflict management plan will turn all that individual creativity into a result that is definitely greater than the sum of the parts.

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