

Unchecked conflict can be bad for business

There is collateral damage when conflict goes unchecked at an organization and its culture becomes adversarial. Conflict creates a toxic work environment, makes it less strategic and more reactive, diminishes the overall workforce capacity and dramatically reduces an organization's ability to attract and retain good staff.

According to Michael Patterson, who quoted countless statistics to emphasize this point, conflict clearly eats into productivity and the bottom line at an alarming rate.

We've heard previously that people don't leave organizations, they leave bad managers. Turnover costs anywhere from 100 per cent to 250 per cent of an employee's annual salary and absenteeism and lack of engagement drain productivity.

And most of us are well aware of the difference between bad conflict, and the damage it causes in the workplace, and good conflict — the type first practised by legendary GE CEO Jack Welch, which encourages debate and leads to innovation and healthier decisions.

Why there is conflict

Patterson defines conflict as a personal experience anchored in one's sense of self-worth, in which there is a clash of opposing wishes. Conflict happens when individuals see things differently, he says. This idea is not new. It has been expressed previously by concepts such as "mental



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models" — the images and assumptions we hold as truths about ourselves and others are biased in some way. Both help to explain why two people can view the same event differently and react differently.

Road map for overcoming conflict

Although Patterson's five skills for managing conflict — anticipate, prevent, identify, manage and resolve — are all important, what differentiates his prescription is the weight it places on deterrence.

While many organizations support initiatives, such as team-building, to help individuals better understand the strengths and perspectives of each team member —

and often these programs include psychometric assessments, a methodology Patterson promoted — conflict still persists.

Is it possible these sessions routinely miss his essential second skill — strategies for effectively applying this knowledge of others in a manner that prevents conflicts from taking place?

And what about all those things we've learned about emotional intelligence? After all, the manner in which we react to conflict is largely primal, harkening back to fight-or-flight instincts.

Emotional intelligence is about our ability to manage and control both our own emotions and those of others, so any strategy to effectively manage conflict in the workplace should logically include it.

One way or the other, the message Patterson delivered is indisputable. However they choose to do it, organizations must learn to effectively manage conflict. It is simply not good for business.

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