



Conflict and Creativity: The Shadow That Produces the Light

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Innovative groups and organizations have long experienced the double-sided nature of innovation: creativity and conflict. Although we may love one and hate the other, in reality, we need them both to innovate. By almost any measure, most people view conflict as a destructive shadow to be avoided and creativity as a positive and beneficial light to be pursued. In what follows, I suggest, instead, that conflict is a critical and necessary component of creativity, and that as Picasso observed about his own creativity, “Every act of creation is an act of destruction.”

To truly entertain a new idea, individuals must give up at least one fact, belief or assumption. In many cases, the birth of one new idea means the death of multitudes of strongly held facts, beliefs and assumptions. One aviation manufacturing executive said, “We are just a couple generations removed from the almost universal belief that manufactured objects heavier than air would never fly. I ask my engineers and designers every day, what belief do we hold that is preventing us from inventing the future of aviation. And that starts lively arguments.”

The idea of destruction or loss as a necessary precursor to creativity involves more than our ideas or beliefs. Creativity is dangerous to the status quo and there are always those who benefit from the status quo in terms of power, prestige, resources and wealth. During the height of healthcare mergers and acquisitions in the 1990s, the CEO of a newly merged, multi-state healthcare system did two things to prompt creativity: he announced that he would serve as CEO for only three years and then retire and directed that each of the six senior vice presidents would be shifted for six months to head a different unit: the vice president for administration would take over clinics, the VP for clinics would take over human

resources, the VP for human resources would take over community health and so on—thus creating conflict. In times of low conflict and uncertainty, specialization and depth of understanding are the keys to creativity but in times of high conflict and uncertainty; as was experienced during the tumultuous period referenced earlier, those same attributes become barriers to creativity.

Conflict comes in many shapes and shades that can be organized along a continuum. I label one end of the continuum as “major conflict,” which is destructive, highly personal, intractable, very emotional and endless. The other end is “minor conflict,” which is easily resolved, lacks negative consequences, and is emotionless.” For brevity’s sake, I will refer to the two ends of the continuum as “major conflict” and “minor conflict,” but it will be important to remember the full range of characteristics of each.

Creativity, Innovation, and “Real” Conflict

It would be easier if minor conflicts were sufficient to spark creativity. Unfortunately, that is typically not the case. The emotionless nature of minor conflict and the lack of serious challenges to existing organizational norms, corporate culture and “group think” fail to prompt creativity and innovation. Instead, minor conflicts can act as a replacement for real conflict, thus fooling the organization and its leaders into thinking they are challenging assumptions and “thinking outside the box”. Even using the trite phrase “thinking outside the box” reflects our belief in a box—an established way of doing and thinking. What if we said “thinking outside the boss’s fantasy” or “thinking outside the smoke and mirrors” or “thinking outside my vision of my corporate success and power?”

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As one hospital president described it: “We spent years ‘play fighting’. It was all very safe but we thought we were challenging the status quo and many of our assumptions. Unfortunately, just when things began to heat up and we began to truly disagree, someone would start telling jokes or call for a break or anything to stop the conflict. And the moment was lost. At the same time we kept telling others—and ourselves—how innovative we were being.” It took a serious malpractice suit and questions about accreditation (in other words, something worse than being angry, losing a friend, or fracturing group cohesion) to force the hospital leadership into genuine conflict; thus enabling them to become innovative.

For most organizational leaders and members of groups, handling conflict is like playing with fire: its fine when you are just striking matches but we live with the fear and concern that one little match will start a fire that burns out of control. It is part of our psychology to fear and avoid dangerous things and our fear and avoidance kicks in with only a few, almost unnoticeable signals. Anxiety, different from fear, is our reaction to anticipated or imagined threats, and it is both more prevalent and operative in group dynamics and decision making than is fear. In other words, we do not have to know that we are in a major, and thereby dangerous, conflict, we just have to sense it or imagine it or anticipate it.

The “Right” Amount of Conflict

It makes sense in terms of our psychology, then, to suppress all conflict in order to avoid the major and destructive conflicts. Because we still have parts of evolutionary brain functions operating, we tend to be better equipped to move away from threat and danger than we are to see opportunity or improvement and move toward it. The question for most organizational leaders is how to have the right amount of conflict to spark creativity and not let the fire burn too hot or spread too widely. Research into group dynamics and what I have observed in working with executive teams in organizations suggests that:

- There is more suppressed conflict within groups—including high functioning executive teams—than anyone will admit.
- Leaders spend significant amounts of time “dampening” conflict, usually by working with individuals rather than the group as a whole. Group members spend equal amounts of time “dampening” conflict with the leader by publicly agreeing and privately opposing.
- Leaders and members of high performing teams think they “don’t have the time or energy” to have conflict so they have to keep it suppressed. This becomes the classic “spend time now or spend time later” dilemma in organizational development. Suppressed conflict, left unattended, will sap performance.
- Conflict that is suppressed spreads faster and more widely than conflict that is openly discussed among the principals to the conflict.
- Suppressed conflict has a cost and rarely any benefit such as prompting creativity and innovation.

One international foundation, known for their good works for children and families, viewed internal conflict as, according to one widely circulated HR memo, “disruptive to the collaborative and team spirit we expect of all employees” and “disloyal to the founder of this foundation and his vision.” Unfortunately, the written policy became a cultural norm where employees would use this policy as a justification to squash the conflict. According to an anonymous survey I conducted, even raising questions about the policy was viewed as a violation. A foundation that prided itself on bringing about change through its ideas soon became outdated with ideas different from those of its grantees.

The Importance of Mid-Range Conflict

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So what is the right amount of conflict to fuel creativity? If the conflict continuum discussed above were given some point values—with extremes of major conflict a “10” and extremes of minor conflict a “1”—then the creativity begins to emerge at about a 3 or 4 and begins to disappear at about a 7 or 8, with conflict from 5-6 the most desirable for fueling creativity.

This “mid-range” conflict has enough importance, enough personal investment in different opinions and views, enough emotion, and enough challenges to current or acceptable ways of doing things that it “drives” people out of safe and familiar ways of thinking and doing. Mid-range conflict carries enough negative consequences to serve as a counter balance to the risks associated with breaking organizational norms, appearing stupid, offending others, public humiliation, and challenging power.

Keith James, Patrick Lencioni, Robert Sutton and several other organizational psychologists and management experts have written about the importance of mid-range conflict in fostering creativity within high performing groups. For example, mid-range conflict is important in setting organizational goals and holding each other accountable; gathering and communicating a wide range of conflicting data sources; and ensuring that all perspectives are heard (a key to motivation and implementation).

Major conflict, in almost all cases, impedes creativity and innovation. Given the highly personal, emotional and intractable nature of major conflict, arguments move away from changes needed in the organization to personal attacks. These attacks ultimately reduce trust, dampen candid dialogue, and limit creativity.

Some organizations have been successful in maintaining a mid-range level of conflict. Here’s what they learned:

- **It’s not solely a leadership responsibility.** Instead, every member of the organization

has some responsibility to speak up, even disagree, both with peers and superiors. After several incidences of administering incorrect dosages of drugs and even the amputation of the wrong limb, one hospital needed to create “Please Ask” training sessions to break the culture of doctors being perceived as always being right and nurses not having the right to object.

- **You need “devil’s advocates”.** A position created in 1587 by the Catholic Church, a devil’s advocate would argue against the canonization of a candidate for sainthood. Organizations and the leaders seeking more creativity and innovation need more people questioning standard practices and norms. Rather than allowing the natural “devil’s advocates” to emerge—and then be scapegoated for their negative views—organizations desiring mid-range conflict appoint them, and then make sure there is “absolution” for them, especially when the idea they argued most strongly against becomes a new practice.
- **Develop norms and ethics around conflict.** During a lean period of my consulting work I ended up working with a “manufactured housing association” and the mobile home salespeople who made up their board. They clearly wanted to improve their association, their board governance and even their own professional development. When I confessed my stereotypes of mobile home salespeople. The association president said, “When you do something that everyone thinks is good for the community—schools, churches, civic clubs—you don’t have to do things right. When you do something that society looks down on, you better do it right.” In the military, any subordinate can say to a superior: “Permission to speak freely?” If granted, the subordinate is free to question

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an order without being viewed as breaking the chain of command.

- **Practice relative analysis.** In another organization, the practice of “relative analysis” in which critics focused on relative strengths and weakness that exist for all ideas became known as “Moonlight and Mackerel” sessions in honor of early 19th century Virginia politician John Randolph who described a political rival as “like rotten mackerel by moonlight, he shines and stinks.” More graphically, an executive leadership team encouraged conflict to spark creativity but had a collection of rubber novelty replicas of distasteful digestive by-products in the conference room that people could throw on the table when they thought someone was making the conflict too personal or becoming too emotional.

Getting better at managing conflict, especially in the mid-range, will prompt the people around you to be

more creative and your organization will be more innovative. Respecting conflict, just as we respect fire, will let you access the benefits while still recognizing the danger. But even leaders successful at managing conflict in the mid-range report that they remain uncomfortable in the presence of conflict. “I always want to find conflict a little distasteful, even with its importance to building effective teams,” said one CEO. “Enjoying conflict just for the sport of arguing and winning and losing is destructive.”

Note: See the next page for photo and bio of the author.

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