

## Five pillars of teamwork (Part II)

# Promote healthy conflict

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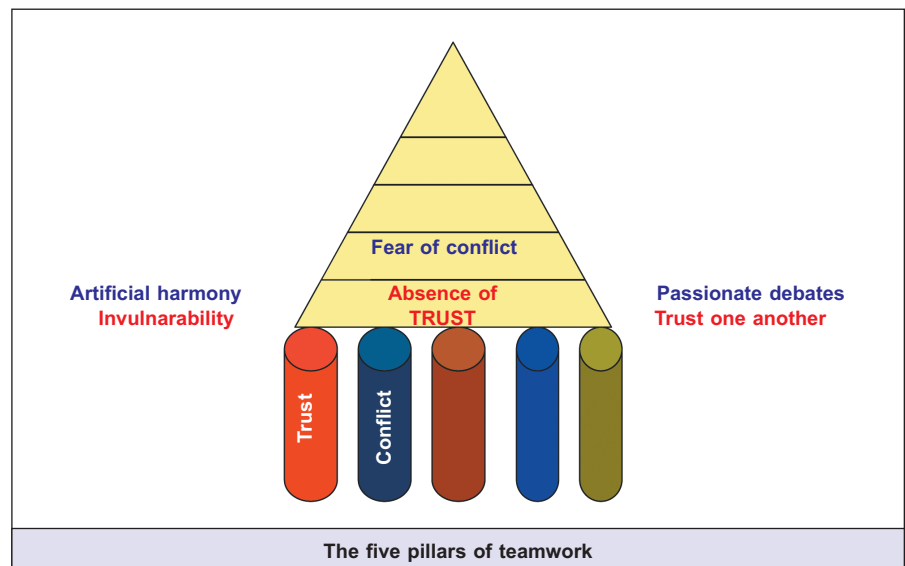
In the first part the importance of the first value – Trust was discussed. Let us now see how this relates to the next value – ‘Conflict’. If the trust is built or exists in a team, then the team members do not fear or hesitate to engage in passionate debates. Not having to worry about being misinterpreted or being branded as destructive or argumentative makes healthy conflict possible. So is conflict good for teamwork? Absolutely, says the author, read why...

Failure to build trust is damaging as it can build the fear of conflict. Teams where members trust one another are capable of engaging in unfiltered and passionate debate of ideas without being veiled in their discussions or guarded in their comments. For relationships to grow and last over time: require productive conflict; be it in business, in parenting, in marriage or even in friendship.

Conflict is ... the result of differing perceptions, assumptions, and/or values; mostly understood as being argumentative and destructive. People often forget that conflicts can be constructive and productive. Many organisations consider conflict somewhat like a taboo, something forbidden and unthinkable, and hence ban it instead of encouraging it. About 20 years ago, when I visited Kirloskar Cummins, I saw passionate debates taking place on why a

particular process is better, why this tool has the best chance of producing a better quality hole, why this machine is more process efficient and effective compared to other options, and so on. To an untrained eye it might have appeared as an argument, but it was a very effective discussion of ideas and finally agreed on the best solution. No individual won or lost here, it was always the team.

One must learn to distinguish productive ideological conflict from interpersonal politics and destructive fighting. Ideological conflicts are limited to concepts and ideas and avoid personality focussed, mean spirited attacks. However, ideological conflict can have the same external qualities of interpersonal conflict – passion, frustration and emotion – so much so that an outsider might easily mistake it for an unproductive argument. Successful teams know that by engaging



in productive conflict it is possible to produce the best possible solution in the shortest possible time. Such teams discuss and resolve issues more quickly and completely than others and emerge from heated debates with no collateral damage or residual feelings, but with an eagerness and willingness to take on the next issue.

Why do teams avoid ideological conflict? To avoid hurting the feelings of team members. But in this process, end up encouraging dangerous tension. "When two persons have the same opinion, then obviously one is not required there," all of you have heard this saying. So, also when team members do not openly debate and disagree about important ideas, they often tend to back-channel personal attacks, which are far nastier and more harmful than any heated discussion over issues. Healthy conflict is a time saver, but many avoid it in the name of efficiency. When you avoid healthy conflict, you are doomed to revisiting the same issues many times. A few tips on how to approach conflict:

- The key is to view conflict as an opportunity to implement change in the way people interact and improve their problem solving skills
- Successful conflict resolution can result in innovations and strengthened relationships for your organisation
- Supervisors and managers do not always have to provide the solution to the conflict, but they should be skilled in how to facilitate, negotiate, or communicate conflict resolutions.

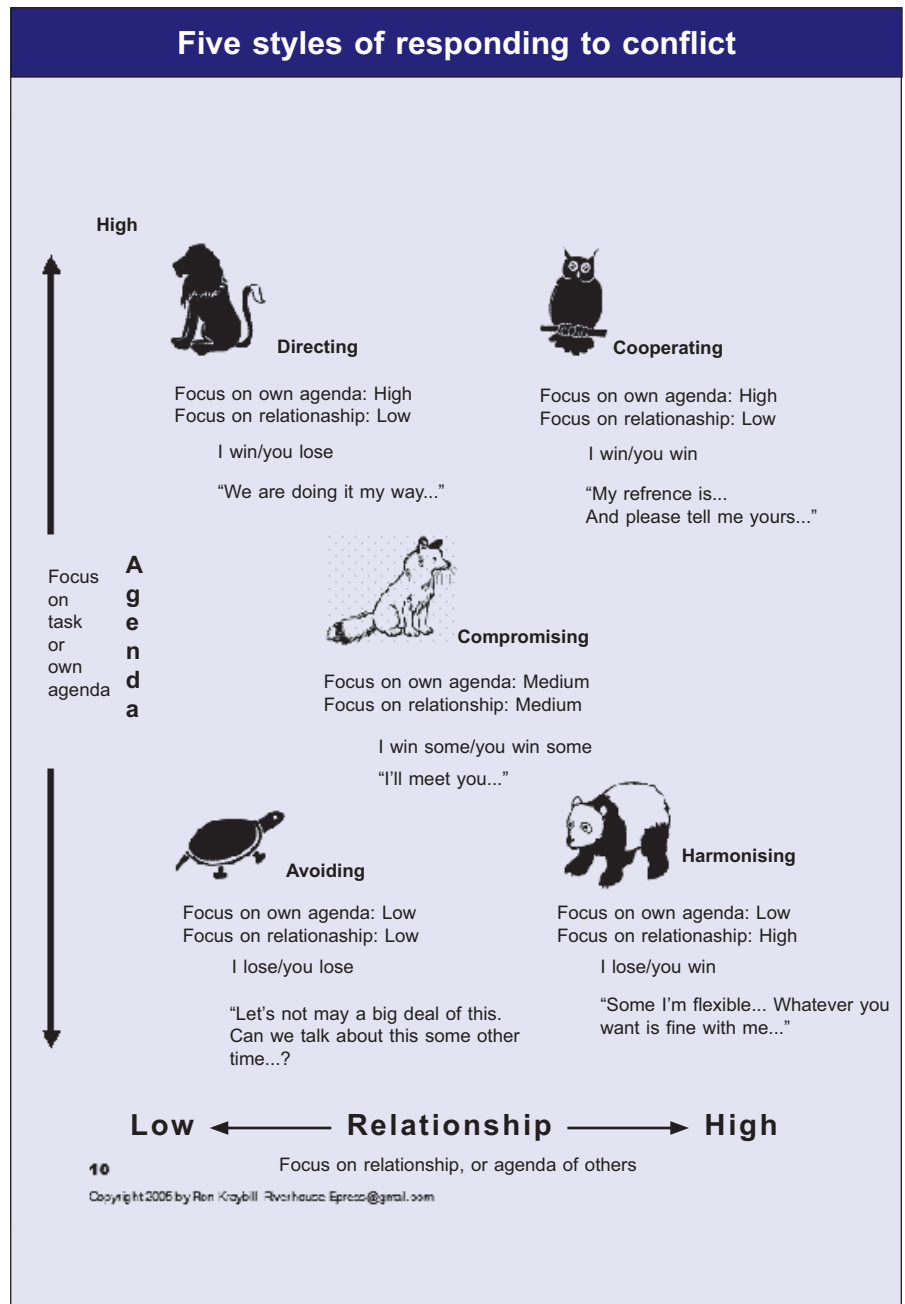
It is, therefore, necessary for an organisation to help the teams develop the ability and willingness to engage in healthy and productive conflict. To be able to do this, the organisation must first accept and acknowledge that healthy conflict is productive. The team members must be taught that healthy, productive conflict is necessary. You can use a few methods to make this possible.

**Bring out buried disagreements**

One of the team members is asked to be the miner. He digs and brings to surface earlier disagreements and sheds light on them. He must have the courage and confidence to call out all sensitive issues and force the team members to work through them. This can be done only by objectivity and a commitment to

| Teams that fear conflict ....  | Teams that engage in conflict ....                |
|--|---|
| Have boring meetings   | Have lively, interesting meetings                 |
| Create environment where back-channel politics and personal attacks thrive | Extract and exploit the ideas of all team members |
| Ignore controversial topics that are critical to team success              | Solve real problems quickly                       |
| Fail to tap into all the opinions and perspectives of team members         | Minimise politics                                 |
| Waste time and energy with posturing and interpersonal risk management     | Put critical topics on the table for discussion   |

Credit: Lenchioni's Table



Credit: Ron Kraybill

### Five styles of responding to conflict

|   |  |
|---|--|
| Competing (Directing): High assertiveness and low cooperativeness...        | The goal is to win                     |
| Avoiding: Low assertiveness and low cooperativeness...                      | The goal is to delay                   |
| Compromising: Moderate assertiveness and moderate cooperativeness...        | The goal is to find a middle ground    |
| Collaborating (Cooperating): High assertiveness and high cooperativeness... | The goal is to find a win-win solution |
| Accommodating (Harmonising): Low assertiveness and high cooperativeness...  | The goal is to yield                   |

Credit: Ron Kraybill

mutual respect is necessary for this process to be effective.

#### The leader's role

A leader must promote healthy productive and passionate conflicts. He must overcome the desire to protect members from harm, as it could lead to premature termination of discussions or disagreements. This will also prevent the team members from developing the skills to cope with conflict themselves. A leader must also help develop the conflict management skills of his team members and not leave them hungry for resolution that never occurs. A leader must also exercise restraint allowing a natural resolution of a conflict even if it is a vigorously contested one. This can be difficult because leaders could feel they are losing control over their teams during conflict. The leaders should only intervene when discussions become personal and issues left behind. Many executives avoid conflict when it is necessary and productive, but a true leader will encourage it.

The characteristics of successful agreements are the agreement must be balanced, clear, fair, realistic, specific, concise, forward looking and a commitment to return to discussions if there is a future problem. There are five styles of responding to conflict, as you will see from the graphic depictions. The key is to be skilled in all the five styles and know when to apply each strategy ♦

*Look out for the next pillar, which will be discussed in Part 3 in the next issue of Modern Machine Tools*



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process of conflict resolution. A team member can be given this responsibility even during meetings and discussions, so that no issues are left unresolved and no ideas are left unexplored.

#### Drain that tension

In this process, members of the team must remind one another that this healthy discussion is necessary to find the best solution, and hence coach one another not to retreat from the healthy debate. Usually, people become uncomfortable with the level of discord when engaged in a conflict, so remind them that the process or what they are doing is important to the team. This may sound simple and somewhat paternal, but it is found to be an effective tool to drain tension from the difficult but productive interchange infusing confidence into the participants to continue.

#### Others

The team members can be taught to understand the various personality styles and behavioural preferences of individuals to better understand one another. Two books I found useful reading are Personality Plus' by Florence Littauer and *Simple Steps to Impossible Dreams* by Steven Scott. One can also take Littauers' personality test, it is simple and it is fun. Many people do not know their own personality traits and this will help them discover themselves. This also helps to understand the approaches of different styles and how they choose to deal with conflicts. The Thomas Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) or the Kraybill Conflict Response Inventory helps the

around conflict, so that they can make strategic choices of which approaches are appropriate to different styles and situations. The chart of the 'Five Styles of Responding to Conflict' (credit Ron Kraybill) tells us about the characteristics of each style. Whether you follow Littauer or Scott or Kraybill doesn't matter, because all of them give an explanation of how to understand each character trait and help you understand deal with it.

You can also use these essential steps to conflict resolution identified by Psychologist Dr Dudley Weeks, PhD:

- Create an effective atmosphere
  - Determine an appropriate time and place (ie, do not meet in your office)
  - Establish ground rules (ie, take risks, maintain confidentiality, listen with respect)
- Clarify perceptions
  - Talk to the right person, agree to be direct, open and honest
- Focus on individual and shared needs
  - Allow for give and take
- Build positive shared power
  - Use 'I' messages and practice active listening
- Look to the future, then learn from the past
  - Talk about dealing with conflict in advance
- Generate options
- Develop 'Doables': The stepping stones to action
- Make mutual-benefit agreements
- Identify areas in which the parties agree
- To meet a shared objective, build on those agreements
- A shared level of commitment and