

Management and Performance Associates – May 2014

Is there such a thing as a productive conflict?

“I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.”

The above line is attributed to Voltaire (1694 – 1778). He was a philosopher during the Age of Enlightenment in France. His quote perfectly summarizes the ideal attitude toward conflict. Before we go any further, let’s clarify that whenever we say conflict, we mean a difference of opinion, not a fight. On a conceptual and philosophical level most of us would agree with Voltaire. In practical terms it’s much more complicated. The following points may help us deal with conflict in a productive way.

1 | Focus on the issue, not the person

Disagreeing is natural. Being offensive is not. With the level of anonymity provided by the internet many people resort to offending the other person and their beliefs because they “dare” to have a different opinion. We don’t need to look far to find hateful discourse on social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter and others. We recently heard that an acquaintance of ours unfriended one of his best friends because he expressed the “wrong” political opinion on Facebook.

Unfortunately this behavior is widespread, not just on social media. It happens face to face with family and friends; at the office, among peers; and in boss-subordinate relationships. Conflict will never be productive if we focus on the person and not the issue.

2 | Suspend your judgment. Stick to the facts

People with opposing points of view tend to distort and/or simplify their opponent’s opinion. Political opponents are labeled fascists. A different sexual orientation becomes a “lifestyle.” A peer who opposes a change suddenly becomes “old fashioned,” and an introverted colleague is seen as “anti-social.” None of these assumptions are necessarily true.

To make things more complicated, it’s not verbal language only. It’s also non-verbal language. When listening to an opinion that conflicts with our own, avoid the following behaviors: Rolling your eyes, letting your face show impatience, using a condescending tone, etc.

3 | Keep an open mind

A wise man once said “When we both disagree on an issue there’s a chance that both of us are wrong.” It’s easy to agree with people who share our own beliefs.

Think about your beliefs such as religion, politics, and even football in some countries (soccer, for our U.S. readers). It’s much too simple to criticize the other side. It’s more complicated to explore the other side’s position. We’re not suggesting that you change your stance constantly, but that you explore other stances. Learn a different point of view. Incorporate part of the idea, if the whole concept doesn’t appeal to you. Get the facts, not only the opinions. Ask open ended questions to understand the other party’s approach. These steps will lead to personal development and growth.

4 | Embrace difference

The corporate world places an incredible value on innovation. Customers demand it, and without it revenues will suffer and the company may not survive. Innovation comes from investigating different points of view, having curiosity, asking “what if” questions, exploring the other side, experimenting with “the new,” and challenging dogmas. Imagine a Research and Development department where the boss kills new ideas by constantly saying “that will never work.”

5 | Learn when to agree to disagree

Some people are built with a need to win every argument. With that in mind, in addition to everything mentioned above, we should remember that sometimes, agreeing to disagree respectfully is

the best way out. Let's go back to the controversial topic of religion.

Every person has his/her beliefs regarding what is right or wrong. Two people with opposing points of view can have a lengthy discussion about religion without the need to resolve their argument. They can agree to disagree. Of course, if the same two people decide to get married—to each other—in a religious ceremony, they will need some conflict resolution skills. Agreeing to disagree is not an option in such a situation. Mature persons know how to clearly differentiate one situation from the other.

Effective leaders are expected to take a stand when it is necessary even with risky and unpopular decisions. We would like to finish this article with a quote from Martin Luther King, Jr.

“The hottest place in Hell is reserved for those who remain neutral in times of great moral conflict.”

See you next time. We welcome your feedback.

To know more of our training programs, please send us an e-mail to:

sergio.pereira@mapa-way.com or

sonia.dondice@mapa-way.com

Visit our website:

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