

The Things We Think



But Do Not Say¹

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For over 20 years, Dr. Quinn G. McKay, former Harvard Law School professor, conducted research to identify Corporate America's priority of three values: *Harmony*, *Loyalty* and *Honesty*. In surveys conducted with managers and executives of varying business organizations, he listed the above values and asked the question: "Which of these three values do you consider most important for your personal career success in your organization?" The overwhelming response was loyalty. Loyalty to one's superior or the company was listed as the most important way to survive and thrive in most organizations. The second value listed was harmony, knowing how to get along and not rock the boat. Honesty was at the bottom of the list for the majority of respondents.

In the same research McKay asked, "Which of these three values – again, listing Harmony, Loyalty and Honesty – do you consider most important to the success of your organization in obtaining its business objective?" When the question was posed this way, honesty moved to the top of the list, followed by loyalty, with harmony listed as least important.

This presents an interesting dilemma. In order to be personally successful, a majority of business leaders believe they are expected to be loyal above all. However, in order for the organization to succeed most people recognize the paramount need for open and honest communication. They recognize the importance of eliminating hidden agendas and thereby gaining a shared reality in reaching their business objectives.

Follow-up research indicates the primary reason why managers value loyalty and harmony over honesty in their business relationships is to avoid conflict. They feel that employees who are experienced as argumentative or troublesome aren't viewed as good team members. In the "real" world loyalty is routinely rewarded – honesty only occasionally.

¹ Title of Jerry McGuire's Mission Statement, Jerry McGuire, Tri Star Pictures, 1997

McKay found that people are afraid of conflict as it often has too many bad outcomes. Conflict often generates bad feelings, ostracism and isolation and, if someone is seen as a source of constant conflict, possibly even an invitation to leave the organization. So in an effort to avoid conflict, many people seek to be viewed as someone who is loyal and works well with others. As a result, a high percentage of people are *thinking things they do not say*. This does not mean their true feelings go away. Even though unexpressed, negative feelings are often manifested in passive-aggressive behavior that ultimately destroys group and organization performance.

As a solution to this discrepancy of what people say and what they are really thinking, consider a radical idea:

Conflict is a more direct path to truth than silence.

Conflict is not always bad. In fact, it can be desirable when managed properly. Cultures of high-tech companies that operate in highly competitive environments and demand fast, unified decisions are often noted for confrontational environments. In some of these companies conflict is not only tolerated, it is encouraged. The importance of making good decisions quickly is so critical to success that risking conflict by telling the truth is encouraged.

So how do organizations manage conflict successfully? First, a better understanding of the nature of conflict must be gained and, secondly, effective management skills must be developed.

COMPETITIVE OR CONSTRUCTIVE CONFLICT?

When conflict is competitive it is destructive. Conflict is competitive when at least one of the parties is insistent on establishing that they are right. Conflict is counter-productive when parties are seeking to prevail on others and prove they are superior in either their thinking or their power.

A sure sign that conflict is competitive is when responses to the conflict can be characterized as *fight* or *flight* responses. A *fight* response is aggressively attacking another person or



their position. Competitive communication is evidenced by conversation that is belittling, demeaning, insistent, or abusive.

The *flight* response of competitive communication is harder to identify. This is when communication is passive-aggressive, incomplete, deceptive, or when communication is simply not occurring. Passive-aggressive approaches to conflict allow a person to stay in control by keeping secrets or simply not engaging the party in disagreement.

THREE LEVELS OF CONFLICT

When people work together, differences will always arise and often these differences create conflict. In order to resolve those differences, more understanding is needed about three critical elements.

- ◆ Methods
- ◆ Goals
- ◆ Values

Since conflict can occur on these three levels, your ability to identify the nature of the conflict you are encountering will be critical to the solution you employ.

LEVEL 1 CONFLICT. *Conflict often arises when values are the same and goals are the same, but methods and priorities differ.*

It is easy to agree on goals and values at 50,000 feet above the level of implementation. If we fly at high enough altitudes we can virtually get everyone to agree that keeping the organization viable and benefiting the members of the organization and its customers is important. Conflict often begins at the level of implementation. At this level people often experience conflicts in either methods or processes – either wanting to do things differently or in a different order.

There is often disagreement on what the “best methods” are to accomplish goals, because there is a lack of shared reality. People have different experience, different skills, and different fears. In these circumstances, even slight differences in style, attitudes, or personal experience can cause conflict. Nevertheless, Level 1 Conflicts are the easiest to solve.

When people share the same values and basically want to accomplish the same things, clear respectful communication will usually level out the inevitable rough spots people encounter in their individual differences.

LEVEL 1 CONFLICT RESOLUTION: EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Noted psychologist, Carl Rogers, spent his life researching three principles of communication. They are:

- ◆ Respect
- ◆ Empathy
- ◆ Authenticity

These principles are extremely useful because they arise from the clear understanding that we all live in separate realities. No two people have the same life experiences, genetic makeup or information about the world. Thus, conflict is inevitable. The greater our separate realities, the more likely conflict will arise. Roger’s principles are designed to create shared realities and an emotional climate to find common ground.

Rogers first identified these three principles when he was about 30 years old and 40 years later, toward the end of his career, confirmed that his continuing research and experience validated that nothing was more important than these three communication principles.

RESPECT

Rogers defined *respect* as holding others in unconditional positive regard. This can be achieved when a person actually holds, in their consciousness, a reverence for the person with whom they are communicating.

We tend to judge ourselves by our intentions and judge others by their behavior.

Since our behavior is almost always short of our best intentions, we constantly fall short of our aspirations. When we recognize others as sacred individuals, we hold them in great respect, not as objects to work our will on, or pawns in our game. Holding others in this kind of respect is a way of *being*. People who have developed this awareness and reverence for others have magnetism about them. Others seek them out because they are a

“safe harbor” and, as such, know more truth about the various issues than persons seen as opinionated, judgmental and self-serving.

EMPATHY

This is both the desire and skill to truly understand others. To understand both content and intent – what they are saying and why they are saying it. True empathy includes the skill of active listening. Active listening is seeking to really hear and understand what another person is saying and being able to summarize or rephrase the substance of what they are communicating so the person feels understood.

Until a person feels understood, they are not open to influence.

They are so intent on making sure that you “get it,” that they will put all of their energy into making sure you understand, instead of listening to any ideas or data you may have. Empathy also creates emotional connections to the other person. It is important to try to understand not only what is being said but also their unspoken intention – why these things are important to the speaker.

AUTHENTICITY

Good communication is two-way communication. It is not enough to simply understand you also need to be understood. It is important, therefore, to communicate your own content and intent – your true feelings, as well as your ideas. Authenticity is important in building *trust*. People can sense unauthentic communication. When people are saying things they don’t really feel or being incomplete because they are afraid of offending another person, it is usually quite obvious. Saying what they think the other person wants to hear or “sugar coating” in order to manipulate is equally obvious. Authentic communication means to be both intellectually and emotionally honest.

Authentic communication is telling the truth with respect.

It is important, however, to note that authentic communication is not a license to “dump” unrestrained negative emotions, angry outbursts, or belittling insults. Simply because you feel

something, doesn’t mean that it needs to be communicated. If being honest will be helpful to the other person, then tell the truth in the most respectful and tactful way possible, but there is no need to purposely hurt or offend someone.

There is a difference between being brutally candid and respectfully truthful. Often candor is inappropriate disclosure of confidences or momentary feelings that are invasions of psychological privacy. Some people use disclosure of private or embarrassing information as a weapon. This is neither respectful nor empathetic, nor is it authentic. It is manipulative and destructive.

A helpful way to understand respectful authentic communication is to think about congruence. Congruence means action according to your values. Authentic communication should take place in the context of your highest self – your true values – not momentary emotions. Authentic, congruent communication will be respectful. At times it may be pointed, even blunt, and it may not be popular but, over time, authentic communication is trustworthy communication.

One can readily see that people who communicate using those three principles of respect, empathy, and authenticity are very influential. These principles engender trust and confidence. Using all three principles will resolve most problems based on Level 1 Conflicts.



LEVEL 2 CONFLICT. *Conflict often arises when people's values are the same but they have different goals.*

When people have the same values but are in deep conflict, it is often because they have competing interests and thus differing priorities. Goal conflicts often arise when people are competing for scarce resources. Battles over budgets, capital allocation, profit distributions, or other resources often give rise to goal conflicts. If saying "yes" to one person means saying "no" to another, conflict is inevitable. If people with different goals must continue to work cooperatively, managing this conflict is vital. When people realize that their continuing well-being is tied to their ongoing relationship they may be open to negotiation and compromise.

LEVEL 2 CONFLICT RESOLUTION: NEGOTIATION & COMPROMISE

When people agree on values, but have variance on goals they need to use the conflict resolution skills of negotiation and compromise. These are needed skills to resolve and manage conflict that honors the values of loyalty and harmony yet promotes honest communications. Solutions for Level 1 and Level 2 Conflicts can be found using the following conflict-resolution model:



1. State the viewpoints from each person involved in the conflict. All other participants should be engaged in active or empathic listening as this is occurring. Listening with respect is an important ground rule. Another possibility is to have an "empathic presentation," a process where participants involved in the conflict do their best to express the point of the other person.

Our experience is that people's positions usually need to be heard before you can move to another level of conflict resolution and once people feel heard and feel that they have been listened to with respect, they are generally more willing to work toward resolution of the conflict.

2. Have each of the participants describe the desired *end* states they would like to see. This process can involve asking a variety of questions to ascertain what ends are desirable for each person involved in the conflict. When ends, or goals, are



not the same people must go up to a higher altitude until goals converge.

When people have similar values, goal conflict is only a matter of finding common ground. Inevitably, that ground is higher up the mountain. Common ground is most often found in common strategic interests. (It should be noted that people who use moral high ground as a tool to manipulate others ultimately fail. They may get away with being manipulative once or twice, but eventually their credibility will become bankrupt. Virtually no one will sustain agreements achieved through one side claiming moral superiority.)

It is vital that respectful, empathic, authentic communication skills are used in negotiating agreements rooted in finding compatible goals. These skills help negotiators more clearly see the real sources of conflict instead of being sidetracked by false issues. Frequently participants involved in a highly confrontational situation are amazed to see that they do have ends that are similar and that their differences are primarily found in the differences in means and methods rather than fundamental goals.

3. Propose solutions that honor each other's ends until you find a mutually agreeable solution. Once the end states are agreed upon and common ground is discovered, then creative problem solving energy can be applied. The highest solution to conflict is to find an alternative that will meet each other's ends in a synergistic way – in a way that doesn't lead to compromise, but to options that meet each others' desired end states.

When this is not possible, parties need to be willing to compromise on things that are less important for things that are more important. This should be done in ways that do not compromise our own or others' values or dignity. Enduring compromise is based on balance and fairness, not coercive power or threats.

In on-going relationships it is important that compromises are balanced so that both parties feel motivated to stay in the relationship. If one party is constantly over compromising their interests, they will find ways to sabotage the relationship. In some conflicts, compromise or negotiation is not possible, and conflict takes place on an even deeper level, that of core values.

LEVEL 3 CONFLICT. *Conflict on this deeper level involves value differences. Value differences can occur even when stated goals are the same.*

Many people can agree at 100,000 feet that the world ought to be a wonderful place to live. However, their definition of wonderful can vary greatly. Value differences often show up when people feel betrayed by others. An example of how value differences can create conflict is the drastically conflicting values between Germany and England at the outbreak of World War II.

Although England's Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, desperately wanted to use the Level 2 Conflict resolution methods of compromise and negotiation, the fundamental differences in values made that impossible. Germany's stated value of "total domination of Europe, based on their perceived superiority as a race," made it impossible to negotiate a settlement that was acceptable to the other nations of Europe.

Parents often experience value differences with teenagers. Teenagers are in a state of differentiation from the family and often want to experiment with a different set of values. If these values include anti-social behavior or possibly even involvement in illegal activities it can create sustained conflict. Often people are disappointed with their attempts of using communication and negotiation skills alone. In extreme cases, where values are largely disparate, these skills will not work.

When someone's behavior is consistently different from their words, look for value differences.

That is, value differences are almost revealed by what a person does, rather than what he or she says. However, people often assume there are value differences, when really there is only a Level 1 or Level 2 Conflict. It is easy to jump on the finger-pointing bandwagon and accuse someone of having unworthy values, as a way of explaining conflict or uncooperative behavior.

This highly defensive approach to conflict will only tend to sub-optimize results of working groups and make interpersonal relationships more difficult. As data about methods and goals is clearly

communicated with respect, empathy, and authenticity, learning takes place and knowledge is increased, which is the foundation for conflict resolution and wise decision-making.

Value differences are relatively infrequent and much communication and observation of behavior over time needs to be made before you conclude that you differ in values with someone else. It is wise to exhaust your skills of communication and negotiation before you conclude there is a fundamental difference in values that will lead to boundary setting. At the same time, as infrequent as it may be, all of us get into conflicts with people and organizations that have different values. Being effective at establishing and enforcing boundaries is a necessary skill in conflict management.

For example, at the end of World War II the difference in values between the Soviet world-view and the Western world-view were so great, the only thing that kept the world at peace was setting clear boundaries and establishing clear consequences for infringement of those boundaries. Likewise, in inter-personal conflict when you are involved with individuals who have different values the only alternative you may have is to establish boundaries to make sure that those differing values do not interfere with your life or your work.

LEVEL 3 CONFLICT RESOLUTION: BOUNDARY SETTING

When you are clear that you are in Level 3 Conflict – a conflict over values – the issue that confronts you is whether you will remain congruent by upholding your personal values. This is difficult. The reason wars often erupt is because value conflicts create so much fear that people suspend all rules.

Value conflicts feel like an assault on one's very identity – not just your interests, but your very existence. At this level of fear, people often resort to violence. In families and business this violence shows up as court action, in the streets with guns and knives and among nations with armies and weapons of destruction.

Boundary setting is difficult. Particularly if you haven't done it well from the beginning. Often value conflicts show up when one person has compromised their position until finally they can compromise no more. If this has happened, this

person has successfully trained other people in their lives to do what they want without consequence, and now a change in behavior will cause even more conflict.

In setting boundaries it is extremely important to announce the change in what others should expect from you. This announcement should be done both vocally and in writing. People will tend not to believe that you are actually setting boundaries that you intend to enforce. Therefore, you are likely to be tested. Tests of boundaries should be met with logical consequences.

For example, if you are setting a new boundary to have your teenager obey a curfew, and are using access to the car as your consequence. You would announce to your teenager that if they come home after midnight they would not have access to the car for the following week. Inevitably, this new boundary (or old boundary that you now positively intend to enforce) will be tested. In order to be effective, the set consequences *must* be enforced.

An absolutely crucial issue in boundary setting is to be compassionate at the point of enforcement. If you enforce boundaries with ranting, raving, accusations and belittling, it will be far less effective than enforcing boundaries as quietly as possible with confidence and firmness and changing the subject to a more positive discussion.

Effective boundary setting allows you to keep your integrity and inner congruence, and is one of the highest forms of human achievement. Those who are skilled at setting boundaries inevitably face less conflict in their life than those who are not.

SUMMARY

It can easily be seen how, in the interests of harmony and loyalty, we frequently are not open and honest in our communication.

We do not say what we are really thinking.

This happens in organizations, in our families, and in our personal relationships. Most of us will not give up the immediate benefits of harmony for the longer-range advantages of honesty if the price is competitive conflict.

Generally, our need for security is so great, our fear of personal isolation sounds desirable, and we find the results of conflict so threatening, that we resort to strategies we think will prove our loyalty or create at least momentary harmony. But when we sacrifice our inner congruence for the sake of loyalty, when we are incomplete or even dishonest to ensure harmony, we create the very thing we wish to avoid – troubled relationships.

Ideally, honesty should be the highest priority in our business and personal relationships. However, this will only occur when we are skilled at respectful communication, negotiation and compromise, and boundary setting. If we want to experience the joy of fulfilling personal relationships, if we desire inner congruency and the feelings of peace, security, and belonging we all seek, honesty must be our first priority. But how do we begin?

A realistic approach to this dilemma is to become skillful in the three major areas of conflict resolution we have discussed:

- (1) effectively communicating;
- (2) resolving conflict through negotiation and compromise; and
- (3) setting boundaries and being congruent in enforcing them.

Emotional and intellectual honesty are indeed the very keys to both loyalty and harmony. They are also the keys to enduring success and happiness. With guileless hearts and skilled communication we can begin *to say the things we really think.* ■