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"Do You Welcome and Embrace Conflict?"

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How often do you and a colleague, client or other acquaintance disagree? Maybe a better question is how many times in one day do you have a different outlook or opinion than someone else? It is a very common occurrence for all of us and will be as we go through career and life. This is the definition of conflict and it occurs daily in organizations between colleagues, teams, staff, vendors, customers, leaders, managers, and in all aspects of our lives.

Conflict is inevitable and healthy in order for progress to occur. It is also a critical factor when managing change during many life stages of an organization. Yet it is one of the most difficult challenges we all continue to face. The more important reflection to consider is how we react to and deal with differing viewpoints. We want to embrace conflict as unavoidable and normal, see it as a positive that is needed to move forward and grow. The problem is, more often we tend to dread conflict and even see it as an obstacle. On the contrary, we want to welcome different perspectives and see the richness in having that diversity to make better, informed decisions.

Managing conflict effectively is a strategic imperative that must be recognized by all organizations. Embracing conflict as a positive necessity, changing our mindset, enabling us to understand the costs associated with conflict along with their impact will empower organizations to lead successfully.

How do we manage conflict in an objective and skilled manner? Understanding our own conflict management style as well as others' can empower us to effectively manage conflict. In

order to do this, we must engage tools and techniques to build our competencies in four basic areas: 1) Self Awareness 2) Emotional Intelligence 3) Communications Skills and 4) Conflict Management.

We have a choice when it comes to dealing with conflict. There are different ways to manage conflict depending on the situation and dynamics involved. However, we all tend to have our preferred way(s) of handling conflict and typically may use a one-size-fits-all approach rather than shifting our approach according to the situation. By educating ourselves on these different approaches, we can be better equipped to manage conflict effectively and actually welcome conflict. How do we do this? There are five conflict management styles – avoiding, accommodating, compromising, collaborating and competing. If we understand these styles, we can start to recognize our own style as well as others' styles which heightens our awareness and can result in effective communications.

The Thomas-Kilmann CONFLICT MODE Instrument (TKI), developed by Ralph Kilmann, is a highly effective tool to help us understand these five conflict management modes and develop the skill of determining which one is most appropriate for the given situation. By doing so, we learn how to choose to gain a greater sense of control and steer conflicts in different directions by choosing different modes. All five conflict modes have two basic aspects, a level of assertiveness and cooperativeness. Before reacting out of habit, we can learn to pause, assess each situation and select the appropriate conflict mode for that scenario. For example:

- Avoiding can be appropriate when tensions are high or the issue is unimportant and best left alone.
- Competing can be appropriate when an unpopular decision must be made or quick action is needed.
- Accommodating can be appropriate when someone is developing performance or when you are working towards creating goodwill.
- Compromising can be appropriate when you are dealing with an issue of moderate importance to both parties and you need to reach a resolution with equal power and strong commitment.
- Last, but not least, collaborating can be appropriate when it is highly important to merge perspectives and integrate solutions for a viable outcome for all involved.

These include a couple of examples of appropriate situations for each mode, however, there are others as well. The Thomas-Kilmann Instrument provides several resources that further explain each mode along with a questionnaire to assess which modes are your preferred ones. When you understand your own behaviors and can start to recognize others' styles, you are more positioned to manage scenarios towards successful and desired outcomes. First, it's important to determine the level of importance of issues. I like to suggest we could even use a

continuum of 0-5 to help us do so, with 5 representing high level of importance. If something is unimportant to us yet highly important to others, that should be taken into account as we assess each mode to determine ideal approach. What if it's a high level of importance to both parties or moderate to one and low to another. Again, it's important to first make these distinctions to best understand the needs and desires of each person.

Another key factor covered by Thomas-Kilmann in using these modes is our ability to develop the skills required to do so effectively. For example: to collaborate effectively, we have to possess strong listening skills and empathy among other skill-sets; to compromise well, we must be able to know how to assess value and have good negotiating skills for starters; and so on. In order to be executed well, we must work on developing the right skills that allow us to use each mode effectively.

Start embracing and welcoming conflict as inevitable and healthy. See it as a necessity for growth and progress by pushing out of your own comfort zone and seeking out other perspectives. Remember, you have choices in dealing with conflict which gives you a greater sense of control and level of empowerment. Step back to think about each situation with objectivity and practice using the right mode for the right situation.

Ask Rita: Do you have a career question and/or a career story to share? Email your questions or stories to rita@ritaballenassociates.com

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