

# EFS SERVANT LEADERSHIP NEWSLETTER

**"When there is trust, conflict becomes nothing but the pursuit of truth, an attempt to find the best possible answer. "If you could get all the people in an organization rowing in the same direction, you could dominate any industry, in any market, against any competition, at any time."**  
Patrick Lencioni

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**TOPIC THIS ISSUE:  
ENGAGING IN  
HEALTHY CONFLICT**



## CONFLICT INTOLERANCE

BY: PATRICK LENCIONI



Early in my career, I worked on a team with a CEO who couldn't tolerate and, in fact, actively discouraged conflict. As a result, his staff meetings were generally boring and not terribly useful.

One day a few of the members of the executive team started to argue. I remember it well because it was the most interesting thing I'd seen happen at a meeting, and because people were finally digging into issues that needed to be discussed. It was uncomfortable; no doubt, as people were finally airing their frustrations with one another about the direction of the organization. But it was real.

Suddenly the CEO pushed back his chair, stood up, and announced, "I don't have time for this." And he walked out of the room.

His message could not have been clearer: *I would rather have boring, ineffective meetings that avoid the real issues than have to endure the discomfort of conflict.* From then on, meeting continued to be a struggle, resulting in poor decisions being made.

One of those decisions, a critical one about product direction, probably didn't get more than a few minutes of discussion at an executive staff meeting. It turned out to be a backbreaker, resulting in hundreds of lost jobs, lost customers, and ultimately a greatly diminished stock price. More than a decade later, industry analysts and former employees shake their heads

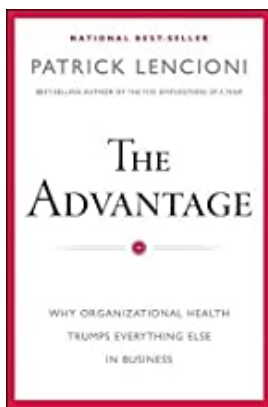
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at the apparent stupidity of the decision. What they don't know is that it wasn't the result of any intellectual deficiency, but rather the unwillingness of the leader to endure the discomfort of the health conflict and allow his direct reports to get to the heart of the critical issues.

Contrary to popular wisdom and behavior, conflict is not a bad thing for a team. In fact, the fear of conflict is almost always a sign of problems. Even when teams understand the importance of conflict, it is frequently difficult to get them to engage in it. **This month's newsletter focuses on how engaging in healthy conflict is essential for organizational health.**

### CONFLICT AVOIDANCE

BY: PATRICK LENCIONI



Avoiding conflicts creates problems even beyond boring meetings and poorly vetted decisions, as bad as those things are. When leadership team members avoid discomfort among themselves, they only transfer it in far greater quantities to larger groups of people throughout the organization they're supposed to be serving. In essence, they leave it to others below them to try to resolve issues that really must be addressed

at the top. This contributes to employee angst and job misery as much as anything else in organizational life.

As critical as conflict is, it's important to understand that different people, different families, and different cultures participate in conflict in different ways. All other things being equal (and they almost never are), an organization in Japan will look very different from one in Italy when it comes to how it engages in conflict. And for that matter, a team in New York City may look quite different from one in Los Angeles. And that's okay, because there is more than one way to engage in healthy conflict. What's not okay is for team members to avoid disagreement, hold back their opinions on important matters, and choose their battles carefully based on the likely cost of disagreement. That is the recipe for both bad decision-making and interpersonal resentment.



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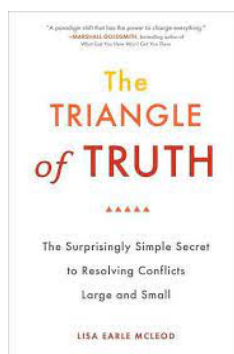
Why would team members who don't engage in conflict start to resent one another? When people fail to be honest with one another about an issue they disagree on, their disagreement around that issue festers and ferments over time until it transforms into frustration around that person.

When someone comes to a meeting and states an opinion or makes a suggestion that his teammates don't agree with, those teammates have a choice: they can explain their disagreement and work through it, or they can withhold their opinion and allow themselves to quietly lose respect for their colleague. When team members get use to choosing the latter options—withholding their opinions—frustrations inevitably sets in. Essentially, they're deciding to tolerate their colleague rather than trust him.

As times goes on, they barely conceal their eye rolling or signs of exasperation whenever that colleague speaks. For the employee who is being merely tolerated, the treatment starts to feel hurtful and disrespectful, which is hard for that person to understand. It isn't difficult to see how this behavior erodes the cohesiveness of a team.

THE TRIANGLE OF TRUTH: 6 WAYS TO HONESTLY ENGAGE IN CONFLICT

BY: MIKE ROBBINS



I have a love-hate relationship to conflict. I love it when things “work out,” but hate it when they don’t. My fear of things not working out, of people’s feelings getting hurt, or of me losing something important are usually high on my list of justifications for not saying certain things, not engaging in the conflict at all, or selling out on my deepest truth even in the midst of it.

However, as I look deeper at what my definition of “working out” really is, I realize that it’s often some version of things

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going my way or some compromise that leaves me feeling like I'm the "good guy" and that the person or people involved still like, appreciate, or approve of me.

**Can you relate to this?** You may have a different version of this story, but most people I know and work with have a disempowered relationship to conflict and have come up with creative ways of avoiding it, not dealing with it, or manipulating themselves, others, or situations so as to not have to engage in conflict in a vulnerable way at all. However, as we've all noticed – this doesn't work or give us much power in our relationships or our lives, especially when it comes to conflict.

Recently, I had the opportunity to interview my good friend **Lisa Earle McLeod** on my radio show about her latest book called ***The Triangle of Truth***. Lisa, a speaker, consultant, and expert in conflict resolution, teaches through her new book and in her trainings that in every conflict there are really three sides to it (like a triangle) – my truth, your truth, and then the higher-level solution. It's not about "compromise" or "right vs. wrong" in most cases – it's about being willing to engage in conflict in such a way that we allow something bigger, better, and more inclusive to emerge.

As the famous quote from Albert Einstein reminds us, "We can't solve the problems of today with the level of thinking that created them."

In talking to Lisa about her book and the Triangle of Truth model that she teaches, I realized that my own fear of upsetting people or having them not like me, as well as my erroneous attachment to being "right" not only create more stress and separation in my relationships, they get in my way of engaging in healthy conflict, which thus robs me and those around me from coming up with higher level, more creative and inclusive solutions – which ultimately benefit all of us.

Here are the **six principles** Lisa teaches and how we can all use them to embrace conflict, resolve it easier, and come up with solutions that can serve everyone involved in the best way:

**1) Embrace AND** – So often we get caught in "either/or" thinking which makes us and those around us crazy, is quite

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sophomoric and limiting by its nature, and doesn't allow us to see or hear anything else than what we already "know" to be "true."

**2) Make Peace with Ambiguity** – Based on our own fear and because so many of us, myself included, like to be in control – we often resist uncertainty. However, being comfortable with uncertainty and allowing ourselves to hang out in ambiguity gives us the openness, patience, and perspective necessary to allow creative solutions to emerge.

**3) Hold Space for Other Perspectives** – When we're able to listen to, understand, and appreciate where someone else is coming from (even and especially if we don't agree with them) we allow the space for something new to arise. It takes practice and trust to allow other people to share their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and perspectives with passion – and for us to just let them be. However, when we allow other people the space to share openly, they often gives us that space in return and we can then find out we're not always "on the other side" in the way we think we are.

**4) Seek Higher Ground** – Because we often avoid conflict or even when we get into it try to get out of it as fast as possible, we sometimes rush to come up with "solutions" or "compromises" just to stop the conflict. This compromising process often "works" on the surface, but doesn't address the deeper issues and won't give way to the higher-level solutions. It's only when we're open to and actively look for those higher-level solutions that they begin to materialize. This happens when we seek higher ground, instead of simply trying to "win" the argument or end it at all costs because we're uncomfortable or scared.

**5) Discern Intent** – With issues that mean the most to us or cut right the core of our most sacredly beliefs, we often have a hard time considering anything else than what we already believe to be true. In this process, we often vilify those who don't agree with us. "Those people" – the ones who think differently than we do -become "them," in a negative way. When we look for and find the positive intention of others, even if we don't see things the way they do, we can get to the core of what's really true, not just what our ego wants to argue about.



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**6) Elevate Others** – This is all about raising the conversation in our heads, with the other people involved, and about the whole situation. We can and do have impact on other people. We're able to elevate the conversation with others when we focus on being real and vulnerable (i.e. honest about how we really feel) and also focus on appreciating and empowering those we're engaged with (i.e. acknowledging them and being grateful for who they are). We can lift up the people around us and in the process lift ourselves up and create the higher-level solutions we all truly want.

Resolving conflicts in an open, conscious, and positive way is a lot easier said than done. And, when we remember these simple (but not always easy) principles, as well as the metaphor of the triangle (our truth, their truth, and the higher truth/solutions), **we're able to engage in conflict in a way that not only brings forth better and more inclusive solutions, but can actually create the kind of peace, growth, and harmony we really crave in our lives, relationships, families, communities, and workplaces!**

## **THE NEUROCHEMISTRY OF POSITIVE CONVERSATIONS**

BY: JUDITH E. GLASER & RICHARD D. GLASER



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**Why do negative comments and conversations stick with us so much longer than positive ones?**

A critique from a boss, a disagreement with a colleague, and a fight with a friend – the sting from any of these can make you forget a month’s worth of praise or accord. If you’ve been called lazy, careless, or a disappointment, you’re likely to remember and internalize it. It’s somehow easier to forget, or discount, all the times people have said you’re talented or conscientious or that you make them proud.

**Chemistry plays a big role in this phenomenon.**

When we face criticism, rejection or fear, when we feel marginalized or minimized, our bodies produce higher levels of cortisol, a hormone that shuts down the thinking center of our brains and activates conflict aversion and protection behaviors. We become more reactive and sensitive. We often perceive even greater judgment and negativity than actually exists. And these effects can **last for 26 hours or more**, imprinting the interaction on our memories and magnifying the impact it has on our future behavior. Cortisol functions like a sustained-release tablet – the more we ruminate about our fear, the longer the impact.

**Positive comments and conversations produce a chemical reaction too.**

They spur the production of oxytocin, a feel-good hormone that elevates our ability to communicate, collaborate and trust others by activating networks in our prefrontal cortex. But oxytocin metabolizes more quickly than cortisol, so its effects are less dramatic and long lasting.

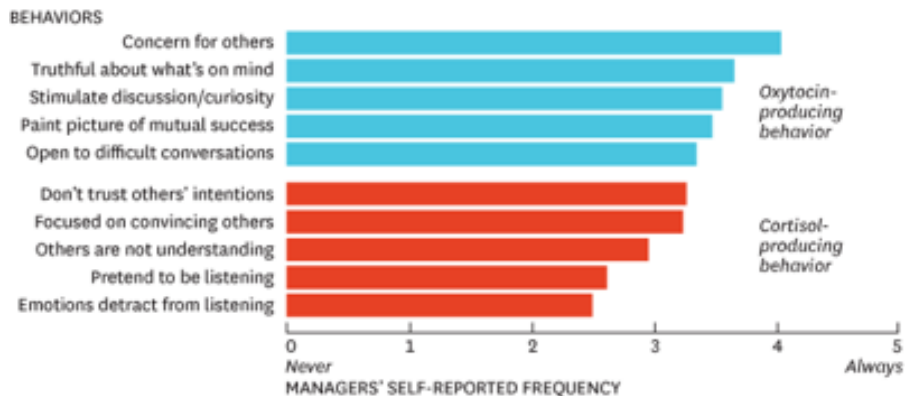
This “chemistry of conversations” is why it’s so critical for all of us –especially managers – to be more mindful about our interactions. Behaviors that increase cortisol levels reduce what I call “Conversational Intelligence” or “C-IQ,” or a person’s ability to connect and think innovatively, empathetically, creatively and strategically with others. Behaviors that spark oxytocin, by contrast, raise C-IQ.



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Over the past 30 years, I’ve helped leaders at companies including Boehringer Ingelheim, Clairol, Donna Karen, Exide Technologies, Burberry, and Coach learn to boost performance with better C-IQ. Recently, my consultancy, The Creating WE Institute, also partnered with Ryan Smith, CEO of Qualtrics, the world’s largest online survey software company, to analyze the frequency of negative (cortisol-producing) versus positive (oxytocin-producing) interactions in today’s workplaces. **We asked managers how often they engaged in several behaviors — some positive, and others negative — on a scale of 0 through 5, in which 0 was “never” and 5 was “always.”**

**MANAGERS’ POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE CONVERSATIONAL BEHAVIORS**  
They may be sending mixed messages.



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The good news is that managers appear to be using positive, oxytocin and C-IQ elevating behaviors more often than negative behaviors. Survey respondents said that they exhibited all five positive behaviors, such as “showing concern for others” more frequently than all five negative ones, such as “pretending to be listening.” **However, most respondents — approximately 85% — also admitted to “sometimes” acting in ways that could derail not only specific interactions but also future relationships.** And, unfortunately, when leaders exhibit both types of behaviors it creates dissonance or uncertainty in followers’ brains, spurring cortisol production and reducing CI-Q.





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Consider Rob, a senior executive from Verizon. He thought of himself as a “best practices” leader who told people what to do, set clear goals, and challenged his team to produce high quality results. But when one of his direct reports had a minor heart attack, and three others asked HR to move to be transferred off his team, he realized there was a problem.

Observing Rob’s conversational patterns for a few weeks, I saw clearly that the negative (cortisol-producing) behaviors easily outweighed the positive (oxytocin-producing) behaviors. Instead of asking questions to stimulate discussion, showing concern for others, and painting a compelling picture of shared success, his tendency was to tell and sell his ideas, entering most discussions with a fixed opinion, determined to convince others he was right. He was not open to others’ influence; he failed to listen to connect.

When I explained this to Rob, and told him about the chemical impact his behavior was having on his employees, he vowed to change, and it worked. A few weeks later, a member of his team even asked me: “What did you give my boss to drink?”

I’m not suggesting that you can’t ever demand results or deliver difficult feedback. But it’s important to do so in a way that is perceived as inclusive and supportive, thereby limiting cortisol production and hopefully stimulating oxytocin instead. Be mindful of the behaviors that open us up, and those that close us down, in our relationships. **Harness the chemistry of conversations.**

