

EFS SERVANT LEADERSHIP NEWSLETTER

“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” - Patrick Lencioni

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**TOPIC THIS ISSUE:
Difficult
Conversations**

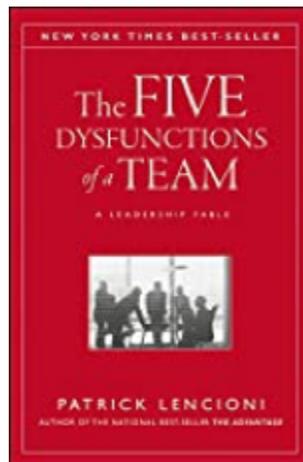
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How Do You Respond To Conflict?

By: Michael J. Stabile

“Where there is trust, conflict becomes nothing but the pursuit of truth, an attempt to find the best possible answer” Patrick Lencioni



How do you respond to conflict? Contrary to popular wisdom and behavior conflict is not a bad thing for a team or in a family. In fact the fear of conflict is almost always a sign of problems. Patrick Lencioni has written extensively on how essential it is for healthy relationships to engage in conflict. He tells a story of a lesson learned on the importance of engaging in healthy conflict.

“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

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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 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."

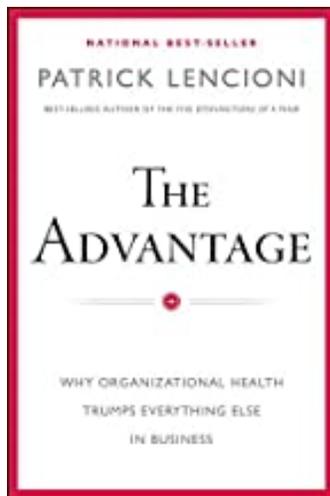
Avoiding conflict creates problems even beyond boring meetings and poorly vetted decisions, as bad as those things are. Whether professional or personally avoiding conflict because of our discomfort has a greater impact on those we are supposed to be serving. Therefore, we need to reframe the way we see conflict. If we go out of our way to avoid direct, constructive conflict or uncomfortable disagreement it leads to an artificial harmony that sooner than later could lead to destructive conflict.

This month's newsletter focuses on how engaging in healthy conflict is essential for relational and organizational health. We are pulling insights and wisdom from the writings of Patrick Lencioni's *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* and *The Advantage* Judith Glaser's *Conversational Intelligence*, and my book *The Heart, Head, and Hands of a Servant Leader*. These are excellent resources if you want to take a deeper dive into this topic.

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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.

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



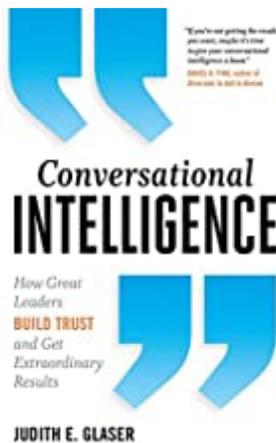
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allow themselves to quietly lose respect for their colleague. When team members get use to choosing the latter options—withholding their opinions—frustrations inevitably sets in. Essentially, they're deciding to tolerate their colleague rather than 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.

Connecting to Confront

By: Judith E. Glaser



Our ability to communicate openly with candor and caring determines the quality of the connectivity between us as individuals, teams, or larger organizational units. While we do not always talk about our fears of speaking up candidly, we feel it. Knowing where we stand is vital to our success, and when we feel we are on the outs, it negatively impacts our performance. We start acting strangely—we protect, we hide, we defend—all because we feel we are being rejected.

Creating the space for open and non-judgmental conversations is a WE-centric skill. As we have conversations and listen, we are able to sort out what affects our personal future and what does not. The amygdala in our brain senses threats and tries to prevent them from harming us. It senses where we are in the pecking order, who is bigger, who is more powerful, and who is a friend or foe.

Even thinking of the word "confrontation" causes our blood to boil or our fears to rise. When we think of a "confrontation" or of having a "difficult conversation" with an associate, it takes many of us to the edge of our comfort zone, and we will do everything imaginable to avoid it.



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Having a difficult conversation scares many of us into thinking we will lose a friendship, and so we avoid confronting the truth. When we feel frustrated or angry with someone who has stood in the way of our success or undermined us and caused us to lose face—at least from our point of view—we get so upset we just can't find the words to express ourselves. Worse than that, we hold all our feelings inside until we boil up and over with frustration, and then we blast that person.

*Confronting others honestly requires that we all share mutually in building relationships, with all parties feeling the power of the exchange; these are power-with relationships. **When we feel others want to own us or take our power away—a power-over relationship—we fear harm and cannot open up with honesty.** If we think of our conversations as a power-over experience, it's impossible to be comfortable confronting others honestly.*

Additionally, when confronting another person brings up potentially volatile emotions, we move with caution and keep our real feelings close to our chest. In the most extreme cases, when in the midst of situations that stir up highly charged emotional content, most of the tension and drama are actually taking place in our own minds. We make up our "story", and this is how we see the world. It is our own personal drama of the confrontation, and our interpretation of our experience. Much of our frustration is coming from the words we use to tell this story to ourselves and to others.

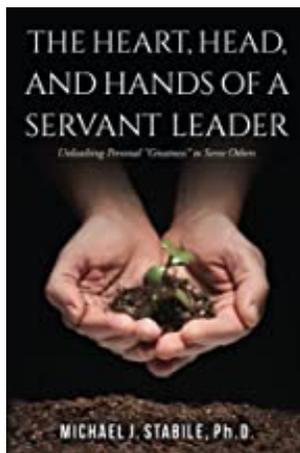
- ⊞ How do we communicate with each other when we feel we are being excluded?*
- ⊞ How do we deal with others in a way that builds relationships rather than erodes them?*
- ⊞ How do we masterfully keep ourselves in a state of openness, with our assumptions and inferences in check?*



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The L.E.A.R.N.S. Model for Having Difficult Conversations

By: Michael J. Stabile



In my book, the *Heart, Head, and Hands of a Servant Leader* and in our servant leadership coaching process, we introduce **The L.E.A.R.N.S. Model for Having Difficult Conversations**. This is a helpful model that can give us a framework for engaging in conversations and meeting with open care and candor. The model provides focus and reminders for how servant leaders can be more conversationally intelligent.

Learn to embrace & resolve conflict

- How was conflict handled in your life growing up?
- Do you have one of the 5 Internal Mindsets that may hinder you?

(1. Negate or Minimize, 2. Covering for others, 3. "I" failed, 4. Misunderstood Loyalty, and 5. Codependent mapping)

- Did you deal with conflict in a healthy way?
- Tendency to react "fight, flight, or freeze"
- Commit to resolve conflict as a "way of life"

Embrace understanding, not victory!

- Learn to listen! Listen to Connect not Reject!
- Don't attack, ask questions? Level III
- Try to understand the other person's perspective. (Remember: Relationship Before Task)

Assume the best! Stay Above the Line!

- Don't jump to wrong conclusions.
- Don't overreact (Focus: 5 min. reboot!)
- Get and give accurate information

Respect the person, attack the problem

- Don't attack the person's character (Relation before Task)
- Separate the problem or issue from the person (Prime the Conversation)



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- The key is our language: Is it **TRUE**, is it **KIND**, is it **NECESSARY** (Positive Energy)
- Treat people with dignity (Appreciation & Value)

Never purposely broaden the circle of conflict

- Don't go behind a person's back or gossip about them. (Engage in direct, open, honest, caring truth telling.)
- Don't embarrass people in public (26 hour shelf life of cortisol.)
- Address the conflict directly & privately first with the individual
- No response, bring two or more people for clarification

Seek and grant forgiveness

- It is the best thing for you (Don't send "mixed messages to the receiver –transparency & vulnerability.)
- You should forgive because you "free up" other person to seek reconciliation
- Learn to ask forgiveness because we are blessed and forgiven in so many areas of our lives. (Positive energy)

A L.E.A.R.N.S. Model Tool for having difficult conversations is the "I Message Format." The I Message Format gives an outlined framework to deliver difficult messages with care and candor. The tool starts with a statement of care and value (I care). Remember be transparent and genuine in order to connect. (Relationship before task.) Secondly, a statement of what you see (I see). Be concise and focus on the "core" heartfelt issue. Thirdly, communicate how "this" made you feel, express the emotion. Fourthly, communicate what you "need" from them in order to address the issue at hand. Lastly, your commitment to them (I will) for how you will react in the future. Below is a sample of the I Message format:

" I Message Format"

A tool for effective Communication

I Care: Mary, I value you as a colleague ...

I See: I see you didn't finish the report on time ...

I Feel: I feel frustrated because you didn't communicate you weren't going to make the deadline ...

I Need: I need you to communicate "good and bad" news to me before deadlines ...

I Will: I will not overreact or make you feel incompetent when you are having difficulty making a deadline ...

