

How to be a “Conflict Hearty” Leader

| BY MARIE MORAN

With competing pressures and differing perspectives on vital organizational issues, today’s leaders face a sea of conflicts they must learn to navigate on a regular basis. How they do that separates the good leaders from the great.



In my leadership coaching sessions, it’s common for clients to raise questions about their more difficult conflict situations, whether at home or at work. Since most of us grew up without good role models to demonstrate how to deal effectively with conflict, we often come into adulthood and the business world unprepared. It seems we are expected to just figure it out, or be lucky enough to have a great boss or mentor who demonstrates how to deal with the invariable ups and downs of conflict in a Hearty and a healthy way.

So what is conflict? It’s the dynamic exchange that occurs when two or more parties have differing views on a situation. We sometimes associate anger or heated exchanges with the word Conflict, but conflict doesn’t really mean that at all. It’s simply that differences exist. Many times the core issues are rather straightforward to deal with, but the feelings people have about the issues or their relationship become the really hard part to work through.

Conflict Hearty is the Solution

Leaders who are Conflict Hearty have the courage and willingness to face tough situations, while staying open as the pressure increases. They have built endurance to do this over the long haul. In contrast, some people will “get in the ring” with a colleague to discuss their differences, but then give up after one or two rounds. The Conflict Hearty leader comes back to the table to try new approaches, staying open to learning on all sides.

Contrast the Conflict Hearty leader with two other common styles: Conflict Aggressive and Conflict Averse. The Conflict Aggressive person comes across as dominating or bully-like, with little interest in remaining open and flexible to new solutions. Or, they may be passive/aggressive, and do subtle sabotage maneuvers out of revenge. The Conflict Averse person tends to be so uncomfortable with the heat of conflict, they either accommodate (saying yes when the answer is really no), or they avoid the conflict altogether. Neither of these styles leads to discovery or learning.

The leader who is Conflict Hearty is generally revered as one who demonstrates emotional maturity (poise and self-control), finds a way to work through tough issues, and focuses on learning for everyone involved. This leader keeps the connections from breaking down completely, which can occur when people walk away from the table altogether, or are seriously dissatisfied with the outcome.



Suggestions for demonstrating Conflict Hearty Leadership:

Be willing to listen fully to the other person, without interrupting.

This demonstrates mutual respect and assists to keep everyone open, communicating and exchanging. Usually an interruption triggers a quick counter-defense, and the conflict starts to escalate.

Ask open-ended Discovery Questions.

Draw other parties out and learn more about their position, as well as their understanding of your perspective. Sometimes conflicts can be resolved rather quickly when everyone is listening to each other, and learning some new pieces to the puzzle.

Seek new outcomes and fresh solutions.

Plus, avoid trying to prove you are right (which tends to polarize people).

If you are going to disagree with someone, first acknowledge what's worthwhile about their position.

This assists to keep rapport high. Thus, it's less likely the other person will shut down when you voice your differing view.

Be willing to speak your truth, rather than hold back on the honesty.

There is a security in honesty based on knowing you can back your words! HOW you speak your truth graciously so that others can hear it is another point on our list! First let's begin with the Latin definition of honesty, which is "one with what is."

One way to speak your truth is to clearly make your yes's yes and your no's no. People generally feel less stressed if they have an answer – even if it's one they don't agree with – rather than being kept in murky ambiguity. Further, if they sense that you are waffling or insincere, they could become resentful or distrustful of you.



Be willing to "get in the kitchen" and take the heat.

When you speak your truth, you may find yourself in situations where doing so ignites related issues you'll then have to address with one or more other individuals. As the exchange on various issues heats up, you're required (as a Conflict Hearty Leader) to hang in there and hold your alignment. As the conversation unfolds, you have to expand, not contract, as the pressure rises or any deep feelings heat up around the table.

Understand that silence can be invaluable as you sit back and analyze a situation.

Being silent doesn't mean ignoring the other party; rather, you may choose to simply hold your balance and analyze what is the best solution. Until you are clear that you are listening to your intuition and good judgment and not your emotional reactions, doing nothing can be a good interim step.

I've seen situations resolve themselves over time when I simply did nothing. When the other person was a bully and I refused to get sucked into an argument, the bully lost energy and took their huffing and puffing elsewhere. It's hard to keep an argument going when the other party won't engage!

Ask yourself key Discovery Questions, such as:

“Where do I see this conflict going? Where do I think this whole thing will lead?”

Some conflicts are just distractions from your purpose and vision. Here’s where you remind yourself that you could win the battle but lose the war. Walking away can be wise, once you’ve weighed all the factors. Pick your battles!

“What happens if this escalates?”

Think ahead. How likely are you to profit in some way if things escalate? What happens if someone else gets involved? Might you lose out altogether or shoot yourself in the foot? Are you (a) willing and (b) able to keep investing time and energy in this situation?

“What do I really want to have happen here? What’s the outcome I’m seeking?”

The answer might be something far greater than the current issue on the table, especially if there is a long history with the other party and negative feelings on one or both sides. For example, it might be that you really want more respect and cooperation, and the money or cost issue being discussed is secondary to your desire to be treated as a valued business partner. The clearer you are about what you truly desire, the more likely you are to get it!

Use Focus Tools to stay open and aligned, and in Discovery.

If you’ve attended our Power of Your Presence workshops, you’ll be familiar with the power of picturing the Golden Pyramid for staying balanced and out of worry, the Black Bull in your heart (if you are a bit timid in heated exchanges), or the Golden Question Mark, which symbolizes following the Discovery. Picturing a Lion in the Heart can assist you to stay connected to your conscience and vision, and also helps to hold when someone else is pushing your buttons.



Avoid the tendency to use war-like tactics which can shut down everyone, including yourself.

Once such tactics get into play, everyone starts shutting off the heart and the peaceful exchange with one another, and that’s how wars get started! War-like moves include:

- Any type of threat (e.g. “taking the matter to legal”)
- Shutting off the exchange and being unavailable
- Exaggerating the truth to elevate your case
- Withholding information
- Looking for allies (people to agree with you or defend you) which is an attempt to make the other guy look bad. This is definitely a revenge move. **Don’t do it!**

All of us as Leaders can learn to be more Conflict Hearty. So as Life brings you conflict situations, incorporate these ideas, and hold yourself accountable to learn. As you do, you’ll demonstrate the kind of leadership we need in today’s world, where so many people are ready to defend or attack at the drop of a hat. **Don’t let that be you!**

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