

Dancing With Conflict

- Marcia Hughes, President, Collaborative Growth

"Mistakes are the portholes of discovery." - James Joyce

Pat, the Division Director for Administrative Services is so mad he can't see straight. Sally the Division Director for Facilities just keeps making decisions which affect his department without telling him. It's wrong all the way around as Pat sees it. They need to collaborate, not just be independent operators, but... After an hour or so, Pat decides nothing will change anyway so he so he stuffs his anger yet again and goes on again in resignation. Sally, on the other hand, had barely thought of Pat when she made her decisions. She's busy and she needs to get her job done so she's charging forward on her own!

What's wrong with this picture? "Lots," you say and we agree. Pat has a concern which needs to be addressed, but he stuffs it. Sally doesn't take time to collaborate. It doesn't take much imagination to think of other conflicts these two may have going. It is likely that other members of the team are also struggling, because it doesn't sound like the team is functioning with an active commitment to address conflicts promptly and respectfully.

In our last issue of Collaborative Times, I wrote about the Patrick Lencioni's book, *The 5 Dysfunctions of a Team*. As a reminder the five are: absence of trust, fear of conflict, lack of commitment, avoidance of accountability, and inattention to results. In the last issue I addressed absence of trust, this time we will focus on transforming team skills from being conflict averse to saying yes to the opportunity conflict offers. Of course, this is one short article, and we have spent years developing resources that help individuals and teams find positive answers to the dance with conflict. If you want to know more just send an [email](#) or call 303.271.0021.

Pat and Sally, and probably the rest of the team, need an intervention. As mid-level managers they need leadership from their boss, and they need to provide leadership to their direct reports on solving conflict. Given their behavior, it is probable that neither Pat nor Sally is being the role model their employees need in order to feel empowered and capable in resolving their own conflicts. We humans are funny beings, the phrase - monkey see, monkey do - is quite an accurate description of our behavior. We instinctively follow our leaders.

This organization can benefit by the top leader becoming comfortable with conflict and taking time to develop this skill as a competency in the Executive Team. We would recommend that it be an expected competency for team to exhibit as well as each manager. Of course, it is one thing to create the expectation and another to develop the skill. The great news is that anyone who wants to improve their skills in conflict resolution can do so with a little bit of practice!

Effective conflict resolution comes from an effective application of several emotional intelligence (EQ) skills. While probably all of our EQ skills are relevant, the most important are:



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- **Emotional Self Awareness:**
We need to understand how we are feeling and why and be able to tell others. This is the foundation for building trust which greatly facilitates conflict resolution.
- **Empathy:**
With this skill, we take time to understand what others are thinking and feeling and why. As the well known wisdom saying advises, it facilitates our ability to walk a mile in their moccasins.
- **Assertiveness:**
This skill is exercised when we do speak up, and we do so with regard for the others. We maintain space for them to disagree and are able to engage in a healthy dialogue. This is pivotal to a group that doesn't want to settle for the mediocre performance that comes from group think.
- **Optimism:**
Believe in success! Research validates that what we believe will happen is a powerful predictor of the future. Believe the concern can be resolved.

Conflict is an opportunity. Guide your teams to welcome the creativity. Develop the competency in your workforce, and you will enjoy a happier and more productive environment.