

Conflict: a golden opportunity

15.08.2019

We constantly experience conflicts and strained relationships, at work and at home, in our daily dealings with family members and neighbours, in the street and on holiday.

Going for a walk, making the effort to see things from a different viewpoint and engaging in self-reflection are three ways of transforming a conflict into an opportunity.

People often tell us we should avoid conflict. Maybe you share that point of view?

Certainly, we can avoid problems if we **ask more questions**. The fact is we often misinterpret the behaviour or attitudes of our colleagues, relatives or partners. Simply asking a question can help us to clarify a situation or understand someone else's difficult behaviour. Better not to let it stew.

This is a basic rule in managing all conflicts: tackle difficult issues at the earliest opportunity. Time is rarely on your side in these situations. Issues tend to become more toxic if left to fester.

For me, the aim is not to avoid all conflicts, as conflicts can be useful in establishing the foundations of a solid relationship and getting to know another person better.

Very often, conflicts mirror who we are and our own values. They arise from confrontation between people, cultures or different aspects of ourselves. Thus we may experience an inner conflict, when we have to take a decision that sets one of our basic values against another.

Wiktionary-style **definition**:

From the Latin *conflictus* (collision, clash, struggle, attack), derived from *confligere* (to clash with, oppose) consisting of the prefix *con-* (together) and *fligere* (strike, hit).

If you want to grasp the opportunity inherent in every conflict, it is necessary:

1. To **be self-aware**. In particular, to be aware of your personal values. On this topic, please refer to my article: "Leadership assumes awareness of one's personal values".
2. To engage in **self-reflection** and consider the extent of your responsibility for the conflict. Here, of course, you need to keep an open mind.
3. To engage in **dialogue**. Sharing on neutral ground, on an equal footing, is vital. Pay attention to the following aspects:
 - verbal: what I say
 - non-verbal: my body language, what my eyes are saying
 - para-verbal: my tone of voice / intonation (remember the saying: it's not what you say, it's the way that you say it).

Here are three tools that will help you to grasp the opportunities presented by conflict.

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Going for a walk

Taking a walk is a key aspect of my leadership training courses. Thousands of managers now use this method, both professionally and in their private lives.

When they find themselves in a situation of conflict, I advise them to take a 20-minute walk with the person concerned.

It seems to me there is nothing worse than an office environment for managing a conflict. Seated opposite one another, hemmed in by four walls, with a leaden atmosphere and poor-quality air.

The benefits of going for a walk are in complete contrast:

- You are walking together, side by side., thus removing the element of confrontation. You adapt to each other's walking pace.
- You are going in the same direction, moving forward.
- You are stimulating your blood flow and thus getting more oxygen to the brain, especially since the air quality is better out of doors. This makes for clearer thinking.
- You feel more secure, as you are out in the open rather than confined in an office. You can break away if necessary, and you can distance yourself from or draw nearer to the other person.

A final piece of advice about going for walks: it is also a good practice when relationships are not under strain. Try taking a walk once every six months with every member of your team. This will scotch the idea that you go for a walk only when there is a problem to be dealt with. One company I've supported has gone so far as to institutionalize the practice by creating a 20-minute walking trail in the nearby forest, with arrows bearing the company name.

Criticism as an opportunity

It is not unusual to receive criticism. You should welcome it! See it as a development opportunity.

Advice on how you can adopt a constructive attitude to criticism:

- Listen - practise active listening.
- Relax, breathe deeply.
- Reflect back what you have heard (how, when, where). This creates the opportunity for better mutual understanding.
- Put yourself in the other person's shoes (change of perspective).
- Thank them for their criticism. You are receiving attention, and this gives you the opportunity to learn something new about yourself.
- Exercise discernment: distinguish between critical comments that really concern you and those that arise from circumstances.
- Invite others to criticize you. Your aim is to learn.

Criticism can reveal facets of your personality that you are unaware of.

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Change of perspective

Draw a grid of four squares on a sheet of paper (two to the left and two to the right, one above the other).

1. In the top left square, think of a person you don't get on with, you don't like or who causes you problems. Write down three things about them that upset you, that you disapprove of, that you see as negative. For example: "He is arrogant".
2. In the top right box, note down three things you consider to be positive about yourself: For example: "I have empathy".
... and now let's try and see things from a different perspective....
3. In the bottom left square, think of the positive factors that may lie behind your negative opinions, the bad things you wrote down about the other person. Very often, if not almost all the time, certain types of behaviour may be regarded as positive or negative, depending on the way one looks at them. For example, the arrogance we perceived as a negative and disturbing characteristic, could conceal the gift of eloquence or self-confidence.
And this may perhaps reflect deficiencies or weaknesses on our part. Here again, it is as if we are looking into a mirror.
4. Finally, in the bottom right, do the contrary exercise for yourself. Consider the positive things you mentioned about yourself and how they might be construed as negative. Empathy, for example, could be seen as the lack of a strong personality, self-effacement, or a lack of confidence and readiness to take up a definite position.

This is an excellent exercise in various circumstances:

- In preparing yourself for a session with a person with whom you have a strained relationship. The fact that you have done this exercise, and taken time over it, will ensure that you convey greater energy and presence when you meet the person concerned. This may create a more relaxed atmosphere and enable you to approach the meeting on a new footing.
- If you have two people in your team who are antagonistic to each other, you can take them aside separately and get them each to do this exercise. Not until then should you organize a meeting and a discussion between the two of them.

Obviously, these tools or exercises will not solve every problem, but they often help to take the sting out of crises and strained relationships and enable us to see another person in a new light. They also help us get to know one another better and understand why some people find us difficult.

Enjoy your walks and changes of perspective!

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