

HEALTHY CONFLICT IN AN AGE OF AVOIDANCE



By Mike Tooley

Prior to this month, I practiced as a labor and employment lawyer for over 32 years, representing employers of all shapes and sizes in connection with every sort of workplace dispute imaginable: single-plaintiff lawsuits, class actions, union organizing drives, and work stoppages.

This experience taught me two important lessons. First, as much as employment lawyers might enjoy the thrill of battle and bask in the glow of winning a difficult case, the employers that bear the cost and inconvenience of workplace disputes often feel differently. To them, the most successful workplace dispute they ever have is the one they *never have*.

Second, the secret most employment lawyers won't tell you is that employees who feel like they've been treated with dignity, had their talents developed, and been *led well* by their supervisors and higher ups rarely sue their employers, even when they part ways in less-than-ideal circumstances.

I believe in the truth of these lessons so much that I decided to become a full-time leadership coach and consultant focused on helping organizations build better workplaces with stronger leaders, healthier cultures, and more engaged workforces. In other words, rather than acting as the surgeon who operates on patients after they become critically ill, my focus now is on helping employers avoid having sick employees in the first place by practicing workplace wellness.

From that vantage point, I wanted to share some non-legal thoughts on one of the most pressing issues currently facing employers: how to deal with workplace conflict in a way that produces sharper thinking, better outcomes, and more collaborative teams.

If you base your conclusions about modern behavior on what you observe in the comments portion of social media or hear on talk radio, you might be inclined to think 21st-century humans love nothing more than a good fight—about politics, world affairs, religion, race relations, sports, or pretty much anything.

There's a difference between disagreeing and being disagreeable, though, and many of us seem to have lost our ability to do the former without becoming the

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latter—so much so that we avoid talking with each other about things that truly matter unless we know in advance the other person agrees with our point of view. Rather than promoting true harmony, our unwillingness to engage in healthy conflict has limited our ability to learn from each other and transform as individuals, communities, and organizations.

DRAGONS AND AIRPLANES

In *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*, author Jordan B. Peterson retells a fable of a young boy named

Billy who wakes up one day to find a dragon the size of a cat sitting on his bed. When he brings it to his mother's attention, she tells him there's no such thing as dragons and goes about her day. Left to its own devices, the dragon mysteriously grows larger every day, eventually becoming big enough to put the family's home on its back and fly away.

After they are rescued, Billy's mother continues to deny there is a dragon until Billy insists that she look at it, at which point the dragon

immediately shrinks down to its original, less fearsome size. When Billy's astonished mother asks him why the dragon had to get so big, Billy observes, "maybe it wanted to get noticed."

Peterson's dragon tale is a classic parable for our modern age concerning unacknowledged conflict. Like the original version of the dragon, conflict normally presents itself in a manageable size at the beginning but can grow to threatening proportions the longer it is unacknowledged and



unaddressed. Paradoxically, treating the conflict as if it's not really there ("nothing to see here, move along") serves only to feed it, making it larger and more destructive.

Iconoclastic author Malcolm Gladwell makes a similar point about the dangers of avoiding conflict in a real-world setting in his book, *Outliers*. Gladwell contends that co-pilots from conflict-avoidant cultures are less likely to challenge the authority of their chief pilots than ones from cultures where conflict is embraced. While this deferential attitude might lead to a less contentious environment in fair weather, Gladwell argues that it can lead to unnecessary crashes in emergency situations in which pilots depend on getting immediate and direct feedback from their co-pilots to make the corrections necessary to avoid crashing. Like the refusal to see the dragon, the co-pilots' unwillingness to point out the pilots' error out of excessive deference can lead to disastrous consequences.

HEALTHY CONFLICT, HEALTHY TEAMS

While perhaps not as terrifying as dragons and airplane crashes, a pair of thought leaders on the modern workplace contend that our collective unwillingness to engage in healthy conflict results in less healthy teams and under-developed talent—the corporate versions of big dragons and plane crashes.

Patrick Lencioni makes this point persuasively in his book, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*. The primary dysfunction of unhealthy teams, Lencioni argues, is an absence of trust among team members stemming from a fear of being vulnerable and sharing your actual thoughts. This absence of trust leads directly to a fear of conflict, in which

team members stifle their legitimate disagreements over important issues in an attempt to preserve what he describes as "artificial harmony."

Putting a finer point on it, Lencioni reports from his experience as a management consultant that teams who fear conflict (a) have boring meetings, (b) create environments in which personal attacks behind closed doors escalate, (c) avoid dealing with crucial issues, and (d) fail to engage the perspectives of everyone on the team.

By contrast, teams who are willing to embrace conflict have *better meetings* in which the ideas of all team members are considered, important problems are solved, politics are minimized, and the critical issues are put on the table for discussion rather than being swept under the rug.

Which environment sounds more engaging to you?

Author Kim Scott takes this concept of healthy conflict at the team level and applies it to feedback at the individual level in her fantastic book, *Radical Candor*. Scott argues from her experience leading teams in Silicon Valley that strong managers must *directly challenge* their team members by giving them necessary feedback, making hard

calls, and setting a high bar for results. Managers who withhold this "tough love" out of a desire to avoid conflict or hurt feelings ultimately are engaging in what she calls "ruinous empathy" that will deprive the individual and the team of the information they need to improve.

For both teams and individuals, avoiding conflict means the dragons get bigger, the planes crash, and performance suffers. This is where leadership comes in.

RULES FOR HEALTHY CONFLICT

Hard-core boxing aficionados might be familiar with the Marquess of Queensberry Rules adopted in the late part of the 19th century, which turned boxing from bareknuckle brawling into the "gentlemen's sport" in which gloves were required, low blows were prohibited, and fighting was confined to the limits of the ring.

In a similar vein, it's possible to come up with rules for the modern workplace that will avoid the polar extremes of no-holds-barred brawling on the one end and Lencioni's "artificial harmony" on the other. Here are a few:

1. **Face the dragon when it's small.** My former partner at Ice Miller, Ryan Poor, has a brilliant saying to describe the effect of unresolved conflict: "Nothing

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festers well." Conflict on a team doesn't go away by refusing to acknowledge it. Instead, it becomes bigger, more corrosive, and more destructive. Deal with the dragon when it's small rather than waiting for it to carry your house away.

2. You owe your teammates your support AND your opposition.

General George S. Patton—no stranger to conflict himself—famously said, "If everyone is thinking alike, then somebody isn't thinking." Just like muscles require tension to grow,

individuals and teams require active opposition in the way of alternative views being offered to point out potential errors, sharpen their thinking, and achieve synergies. Iron sharpens iron by clashing not cuddling, so don't deny your teammates the benefits of your different perspectives.

3. Keep the conflict in the ring.

Just like a boxing ring, healthy conflict requires boundaries. Express disagreements openly, keep them in the room, and leave them there when the bell rings. Nothing contributes to a toxic culture more than disagreements being whispered behind closed doors rather than expressed and dealt with openly. Healthy conflict is not a license to be a pot-stirrer.

4. Assume positive intent. When someone takes issue with your idea, resist the temptation to assume bad motives. Attribute to them the same motive you would ascribe to yourself under the circumstances—namely, that you have a different perspective you'd like to share for the betterment of the team—and extract whatever value you can from their observation either to make your idea better or abandon it if necessary.

5. Attack the issue, not the person. The corollary to Rule



No. 4 is that you must not only assume positive intent but *embody* it as well. This means separating the issue from the person and attacking the former while respecting the latter. It also means avoiding “getting historical” by bringing up previous disagreements to score points instead of solving the problem.

6. **Seek first to understand, then to be understood.** The fifth habit from Stephen Covey’s *7 Habits of Highly Effective People* is as critical for healthy conflict among teams as it is for individual effectiveness. Listen deeply for the essence of what your colleague is trying to say—perhaps repeating it back to them to make sure you got it right—rather than looking for the first opening to sneak in your rebuttal. When you understand the direction they’re coming from, disagreements over next steps become much easier to navigate.
7. **Agree to disagree.** Finally, if there’s one rule of healthy conflict I wish our nation could embrace, it’s that reasonable people can and should disagree *without becoming unreasonable* about it. Some of the dearest people in the world to me have drastically different ideas about all manner of things—different from me and from each other—and I cannot imagine how much poorer my life would be if they canceled me out of their lives for my own differing views. You win some arguments and lose some in the workplace just as in politics, and healthy conflict requires you to handle both with grace and charity.

My favorite observation about healthy conflict comes from the film *Jerry Maguire*, when Jerry’s last remaining client turns to his frustrated agent in a pivotal scene and says, “You think we’re fighting. I think we’re finally talking!” What rules *would you add* to the list above to help your team start “finally talking” to achieve its goals together? ☺

Mike Tooley is a founder of Upstream Principles LLC, which provides individual coaching programs tailored for the unique needs of business owners, CEOs, and organizational leaders as well as workshops and custom presentations for their teams. Mike retired from Ice Miller LLP in February 2024 and is giddy to report he no longer keeps track of his days in six-minute increments!

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