



Fiona White is a Conflict Resolution Professional at Mediation Matters, Auckland. Email: fiona@mediationmatters.co.nz

conflict resolution skills – the essential leadership tool

You aspire to be a leader in your organisation, your field and your community. You have the vision, the courage, the creativity, the integrity, and you inspire and motivate others. You create your own roadmap.



Roadblock ahead

What happens when you hit a bump in the road; when you come up against people who disagree with you or block your progress, when conflicts within your team escalate, or when someone criticises you personally? Do you steamroller over the top and insist everyone follow your direction, because after all you are the leader? Do you allow these issues and criticisms to preoccupy your thoughts and drain your energy? Or do you sit down with the people concerned and have an open, respectful dialogue with them, without holding on to any particular outcome? What kind of conflict resolution skills are you modelling for those who are following you?

Here in New Zealand there is a strong tendency to avoid conflict, to stick our heads in the sand and hope the problem will go away, or to come out fighting. We all know that neither of these strategies is constructive, but this country's history has led to us suppressing our intuition, and seeing the open discussion of our

emotions and needs (the source of conflict) as showing weakness. The recent breakthroughs in neuroscience reveal that this 'suppressed' approach can actually cause serious damage – reducing our resilience and increasing feelings of isolation, neither of which are conducive to creating a strong team or community.

Neuroscience and Leadership

At a HRINZ seminar on *Neuroleadership through Uncertainty* in August, David Rock of the Neuroleadership Institute discussed how conflict, in the shape of uncertainty or direct perceived threats, results in increased activity in the part of the brain known as the amygdala. A direct consequence of this is that activity in other parts of the brain is reduced, notably in working memory and creativity. In other words, it becomes harder to think clearly.

This situation worsens if we try to resolve the uncertainty or threat by focusing on logic, data, reasoning, or the past (typical management strategies), or if we try to suppress our emotional response. Recent research by Dr. Matthew Lieberman (Neuroleadership Institute) has found that, "Putting feelings into words turns on the brain's braking system," thereby reducing activity in the amygdala.

The two key strategies for dealing with such situations are:

1. Labelling (vocalising) what just happened and the resulting specific emotion (this normalises the situation)
2. Reappraisal of (reframing) the negative as a positive.

With practice, this approach can help us to reappraise new threats more quickly into a more positive light.

Empathy

By being specific about what just occurred, or about the specific behaviour that someone did that we did not appreciate, we stop the brain from creating a destructive narrative that paints us as the victim. In naming the emotions that arose in us, we give ourselves empathy (resulting in small doses of oxytocin being released into the brain) and make ourselves more open to listening to others.

Empathy is the golden key to engaging with and motivating others, and persuading others to listen to your vision; without it, colleagues feel disconnected and devalued. Although simple in theory, empathy is exceedingly hard to put in to practice – being fully present with someone and trying to put yourself in their shoes, without either judging or taking on the other person's emotions. There is a real art to it, and it requires focus and practice, as well as the willingness to work through your own conflicts and to manage triggers.

"Mirror neurons fire in the brains of observers watching a given action, and replicate to some extent the experience of the one being observed. These neurons fire when we observe someone else suffering or frightened, reproducing those experiences in the form of empathy." – Kenneth Cloke, leader in conflict resolution

Equally, we find ourselves becoming calmer and more open when we observe someone in a peaceful, empathic state. If you are not authentic in your actions, the observer will respond accordingly. Working with a mentor or coach who is proficient in empathy will help you to achieve authenticity on both a conscious and subconscious level.

What does this mean for you as a leader?

A leader recognises that an organisation is able to reach its full potential only when the employees are engaged, committed, alert, interconnected, enthusiastic, courageous and confident. Conflict can either stifle these qualities, or create

opportunities for strengthening them, depending on how it is handled. There are many levels of conflict, and we often only try to deal with the surface 'issues' that we are aware of. The diagram below shows just how deep we may need to go to achieve genuine resolution.

Cloke's Iceberg of Conflict:



Tapping into the emotions enables us to see them as the expression of an unmet need. Once we work out what that need is, we can look at strategies for meeting it and work toward a resolution. Both emotions and needs are strongly influenced by our self-perceptions and our own (sometimes false) expectations, which can become significant stumbling blocks. Discussing these openly, in a safe environment, can help to achieve the clarity required to reconcile differences, to let go and move on. Conflict management is about dealing with only the issues and personalities near the surface; conflict resolution is about working through the deeper levels to achieve a longer-term solution, one that enables employees to fully engage with their environment.

"The manager does things right; the leader does the right thing." – Warren Bennis and Joan Goldsmith in *Learning to Lead*.

A manager requires conflict resolution skills to deal with interpersonal conflict (between colleagues), intra-organisational

conflict (between teams) and inter-organisational conflict (with suppliers, clients and competitors). A leader requires the additional skills of self-awareness and self-regulation to be able to deal with all the above and his or her own intra-personal conflict (ideas, needs, roles), in such a way that he or she achieves not only the best possible outcome, but also models and passes on best practice to others.

The core conflict resolution skills for a leader are:

- Recognising the smallest signs of conflict
- Managing own internal and external reactions, and being aware of others'
- Recognising own and others' triggers
- Heightened awareness of consequences of actions, reactions and interventions (or lack thereof)
- Cognition of own contribution – modelling best practice (and lapses thereof)
- Developing the confidence and competence to handle any challenging situation and achieve the best possible outcome, by utilising the earliest opportunity for intervention
- Knowing own limitations (within role), and when to bring in external support.

Take action

If you take away one thing from reading this article, let it be to examine your own competency in handling conflict. Where are your strengths and weaknesses? How might you improve? Who might you talk to about upskilling? Who is your role model, and what behaviours of his or hers do you have the greatest respect for? What positive results have you noticed from your own strategies? What behaviours of your own would you like others to emulate?

"The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy." – Martin Luther King, Jr. ■

For specialists in talent management, succession planning, engagement and retention with award winning products contact mark@matrixone.co.nz

MATRIX | one

www.matrixone.co.nz