

Navigating Conflict in the Workplace

03/05/2023

CCH Learning:

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We'll collect those up on our end and ask them during the Q&A session and try to get through as many of them as we have time for. One last thing before we dive into the session, just a reminder that we have a subscription service for CCH Learning, which provides access to the entire library of content. And that's for an annual flat fee, and of course, includes the automatic tracking and logging of your CPD

Today, our presenter is Deborah Assheton, who is the owner and director of The Amplify Group, a business that uses best practice frameworks to deliver very practical high impact leadership change and interpersonal skill building workshops, coaching and leadership programs.

Deb's passion is to help professionals deepen their self-awareness and embed behaviour that creates new levels of performance, engagement and results for them. Deb offers executive coaching leadership development programs at short and public workshops and has over 20 years experience in executive leadership positions where she's managed some very large teams of more than 3,000 people for some of Australia's best known and highly regarded companies, including Vodafone, Bupa, and OPSM. Deb holds a BA in psychology and a master's of organizational coaching from Sydney University. Her experience and clients span the retail and wholesale property management, banking, legal, technology, transport, and motoring and tech telecoms industries. I'll now pass you over to Deb, who will take us through today's presentation. Hi, Deb.

Deborah Assheton:

Thanks, David. Hi, everyone. We'll just get the screen set up and go from there.

CCH Learning:

Handing over to you now.

Deborah Assheton:

Thank you. I'll just make sure that we've got the right screen here. So, David, just confirming that you can see the presentation.

CCH Learning:

Yep, we've got it. That's the right one.

Deborah Assheton:

Excellent. All right. Well, I'm really excited to be talking to you all today about navigating conflict in the workplace. It's obviously an enormous topic. It's not a new topic, and it's certainly a topic that if we can wrap our head around how conflict can serve us, and how we can harness it and use it as a fuel for performance and engagement, it can be a game changer. And that's really what I want to talk to you about today. But obviously, we'll start with talking about conflict itself and the difficulties around it. So, today, we'll be talking about what is conflict, so what is it and what is it not, what does it look like in the workplace? And there's primarily two buckets there. There's conflict between individuals and then conflict around what we should do, strategic conflict, operational conflict, so different ideas.

I'm going to focus on the ideas piece today or the ideas aspect, but we'll look at a bit of both. Then we'll talk about what it means to actually be in the realm of constructive conflict. And then as leaders, how can we lead for constructive conflict? So, how can we step in to constructive conflict or to conflict generally and lead it in a way that is constructive? And then I've got some practical discussion that we'll have using the questions box around how we can frame constructive conflict so that we commence our conversations about it in a way that's really healthy. So, we'll cover a fair bit of ground in the next hour. So, let's start by looking at what is conflict. Well, conflict is not a disagreement, it is not a difference of opinion, it is not a disconnect. It is not somebody seeing things differently than you, so a different perspective. That is simply a different perspective or a difference of opinion or something that we don't agree on. That's not conflict.

Conflict happens when that disconnect becomes a struggle, when there is some kind of clash, when there is some kind of activity around the disconnect. That's when we get into a space of conflict. And sometimes we see leaders and team members jump those steps, so that the moment there's a disagreement or there's a different point of view or a different view or a different opinion, there's automatically assumed that that will create a conflict. And that doesn't have to be the case. So, conflict doesn't happen because we have different points of view, it happens because we fall into a struggle around those. Now, when we talk about conflict and struggle, what we're generally talking about is this aspect of conflict where it can be destructive or unexpressed, which I'll talk about more in a moment.

Now, this struggle or this clash can be overt, as in obvious, or it can be hidden. So, it can be explicit or implicit. So it can be obvious or hidden. It can be aggressive or it can be cold. This is where people get the cold shoulder. So, as I said, it can be overt or implicit. They're all forms of conflict. Some of them are simply expressed and others are unexpressed. And of course, none of them are great for the culture or for engagement for that matter, or for performance. So, we know that conflict that is not managed is like an acid for performance, engagement and culture. It erodes all of those things over time. And most of you will know about the proverbial elephant in the room. What we don't discuss, what we don't address just tends to get bigger, and bigger, and bigger, and bigger, and so that it can actually become the defining feature of a team, can be the unexpressed conflict in the room or of a culture generally.

And that's not what we want to happen. So, conflict exists on a continuum. And I've just got a basic continuum that I've put up here in regards to what we're talking about today. So, you can have destructive conflict through the unexpressed conflict or constructive conflict. Really, the topic of conflict is not what dictates whether we end up in one of these three buckets or all of these three buckets. It's rarely about the topic and more about how people involved, including the leader, responds to the topic, so how we each show up in relation to the issue of conflict or the topic of conflict. Destructive conflict is where we see conflict diminish and disintegrate

interpersonal attacks. It often demonstrates really low emotional intelligence and low interpersonal skill sets. So, this is where we see really poor behaviour in a meeting or poor behaviour between people where it becomes personal, it often becomes quite aggressive, it becomes about right and wrong, rather than who's right and who's wrong, rather than what is the right thing for the business or the team. And it can dissolve into attacks.

It's absolutely brutal to be part of this kind of environment, to be in the room or to be a person involved in it, and it's very damaging for the culture. What destructive conflict does is create a sense of apathy for most people that witness it. So, it damages us in a way where we just tend to tune out because the destructive level is really unhealthy and we know that. It's also a relationship deal breaker. So, once we've got into a space of destructive conflict, it's very hard to mend the relationship with that person or with that client, or with that other department or team member. So, when we get into this space, this is where we're actually really doing damage to ourselves, to relationship with others, and because performance follows relationships, ultimately to performance.

So, when relationships break down, we know that performance, it's very hard for any kind of real level of performance to continue between those people or those groups. And so, when we get into destructive conflict, it's pretty much assured that performance will suffer. So, this is not where we want to be. Unexpressed conflict is where things are not said. So, the conflict is clear to people, it is felt rather than spoken about. It might be spoken about in a triangulated sense, so it might be the subject of gossip, it might be something talked about behind closed doors. It might be something whispered about in hallways, but it's not addressed directly to those involved, whether that's the leader or a person or people or a client.

Where we have unexpressed conflict, it's often a feature that there's a lack of psychological safety. And so, by psychological safety, what we're talking about is our emotional safety. Not physical safety, our emotional safety. So, we feel like if raise that issue of conflict, either with a person or with a leader or a client, that we will be shut down, that we will be ostracized in some way, that we will be dismissed, and so that there'd be some kind of downstream punishment for us bringing up that conflict. So, there's a lack of psychological safety to raise the issue so it gets left unexpressed. It's also often a sign of an approval orientation in a team. So, this is where the leader creates an environment where the most important thing is that you keep them happy.

So, if I'm the leader and I create an approval orientation, then I'm happy when my team do what I ask. I'm happy when people don't offer any alternative views. I'm happy when people don't challenge me. I'm just happy when things happen the way I want them to happen. And that creates an approval orientation in the team, and an unexpressed conflict is typical of that kind of team. It's also typical of an environment of group think. So, by group think, what we talk about here is that everybody has agreed either too quickly with the leader or doesn't really feel that they are able to step outside what the leader or the group thinks or says. Now that can be a safety issue as well, but it also can be that there is a preference in the team for harmony over performance.

And we often see this in environments where the market is changing and the organization doesn't want to change. And so, the executive team talk about things that make it harmonious in the team, rather than the need to change because performance or market share is dropping. So, group think happens when there's this preference for harmony over performance. What we know is the outcome here is that there's poor relationships and lower performance. So, unexpressed conflict is a slower burn than destructive conflict, but it ends up in the same place. And of course, there's a cycle that can happen where things go unexpressed for a long time and then they blow up, so to speak. They explode into destructive conflict which ends badly and then it goes back into unexpressed conflict because everyone was feeling burned. So, they can operate in a very vicious cycle in teams between individuals and at the level of the organization.

Constructive conflict on the other hand is a very different experience. Constructive conflict is where we use the different points of view. We use the differences of opinion, the differences of experience and perspective in service of finding a better way. And so, those divergent opinions and options become a fuel to look at how do we evolve what we are doing, how do we improve what we're doing? How do we change the way we need to change in response to the market or to COVID or to hybrid working, which is the subject of lots of conflict at the moment between organizations and employees and among employees and leaders? And in some organizations, it's unexpressed. In others, it's destructive. And in many, it's constructive.

And so, how do we use our different perspectives in service of getting better and in service of doing it really well? Where we get into a space of constructive conflict, this is associated with high performance and better relationships. It is more difficult to manage, which is why we're going to spend some time on it today. And it requires more and different awareness and skill sets from leaders, but also from the people participating in that constructive conflict, which is what we're going to be talking about today. So, there's very, very few issues that don't benefit from some level of constructive conflict. It doesn't mean that we have to have conflict for six months. It doesn't mean we have to go off to the side of a hill in Greece in the sunshine eating olives to have a debate so that it stays constructive.

But what it means is that if we devote the time and we set it up correctly, difficult matters that we need to solve in our business or in our organization or in our team can often be solved or get close to it, harnessing constructive conflict among your very good team members. And that's what I want to talk to you about today. So, I'd love to know, I'm going to ask David to open a poll, what sort of types of conflict do you see or feel in your workplace? So, do you see A, mainly constructive conflict, B, mainly unexpressed, or C, mainly destructive conflict, or D, I'm not sure? And I'm asking you for mainly. I know most of you will see a mix. So, what do you mainly see or feel? I'll give you a minute or two to respond to that.

Often, the type of conflict in a culture is felt in a primary and secondary way. So, people might say, "Look, it's mainly unexpressed and then it's destructive," so secondary, it's destructive. Or it's mainly constructive or it's unexpressed. So, there's usually a predominant way that conflict is managed in culture, whether that's proactive or reactive. And so, that's what I'm wondering about your culture. All right, David, maybe if you could share the results, that'd be great.

CCH Learning:

Yeah, just throwing those up for you there now, Deb. So, 33% have gone for option A, mainly constructive, 58% mainly unexpressed, and 8% mainly destructive.

Deborah Assheton:

Okay. So, it's good that we've got a majority in the constructive. That's a great start. That's awesome. For those of you that are in unexpressed and destructive, hopefully you'll find this useful today. As well as those of you who are destructive-

CCH Learning:

Sorry, Deb, I may not have been clear there. The majority was unexpressed. So, 58% unexpressed.

Deborah Assheton:

Oh, sorry, I heard 15, I apologize. I didn't think it added to 100, but that's okay. 58, okay, unexpressed. Great. All right. So, for those of you in that category, when we talk about framing constructive conflict or framing conflict constructively, that's the practical aspect of helping shift. What we want to do with unexpressed conflict is to surface it, rather than leave it in the avoided space. So, I'll come back to that. For destructive conflict, again, what we want to do is surface the issue of conflict, but stay out of the destructive behaviours. And remember, it's not the issue that makes it constructive, unexpressed or destructive. It's how we set that issue up and how we hold it in play. And when I say play, I don't mean play as in fun times, I mean play as in how we hold it live in play to let it play out.

And it's a navigation. Hence, the name of this workshop, there is no strict formula for doing that. So, what we want to do is have issues of conflict expressed constructively in the workplace. And that's what we'll talk about now. So, I want to just take a step back and talk to you about the type of challenges that leaders and organizations are facing, and how that is shifting, and that some challenges require and benefit from constructive conflict as part of the way that we solve them. For those of you that were on our workshop last month, you will have seen two of this slides. So, apologize for the repetition, but it's important for this one. What's happening globally is that we are in what's called a VUCA environment, and we have been for around the last 20 years.

So, VUCA stands for volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous. And these are the characteristics of the environment that we live in, that we lead in, that we are running businesses in, that we're servicing clients in. And all of these aspects feed into each other. So, volatility is the sheer rate and the degree of change that we are experiencing, and the volume of what are called change catalysts. So, change catalyst is one thing, just one thing that goes on to change many other things. So, obviously, a good example of a change catalyst is COVID. It was a virus that went on to change almost every aspect of our lives around the world. Other examples of change catalysts are the advent of the iPad, for example. So, that technology that swiped, technology changed the way that we interfaced and certainly the way that our children interfaced with technology, and that had ripple effects across many areas of our lives. So, they're change catalysts.

Now, we are facing more change catalysts right now in this modern era than we have ever done before in human history. So, there are more of these happening. So, just quote two big ones that are on the horizon. AI is a change catalyst that we're all obviously about to embark on, and so is climate change. So, we've got lots of these happening. Uncertainty is the sheer unpredictability of events. It's very hard to predict what's going to happen in the environment or in business at the moment. And uncertainty is measured by a number of global forums, World Health Organization, World Economic Forum, all measure uncertainty. And it has been steadily increasing since the late 1960s. The degree of uncertainty peaked during COVID. It's come back down again, but it's still this upward trend with more uncertainty.

Complexity refers to just the sheer interconnectedness of all things now. It's very hard to understand a specific and discreet cause and effect chain, because so many things are interconnected. And that means that changing one thing has so many ripple effects that it's very complex to wrap our head around. And ambiguity is this haziness of things. Nothing feels like it's set in concrete because there's so much volatility, uncertainty, complexity. It's very hard to know where we stand. And so, what's happening is that because we are living and leading in this environment, is that it's changing the nature of challenges that we face as leaders. So, we're seeing more change catalysts, which means we have to be ever responding. It's changing the nature of problems, challenges, as well as opportunities that we face, and it's elevating the importance of constructive conflict.

And I want to talk to you about why. So, traditionally, leaders faced what were mainly technical or classic challenges as they were known. A technical challenge is one that's easy to identify. It can be solved by the knowledge of experts. The link between problem, solution and implementation are usually fairly clear, and resolution is easily identifiable. And so, Ronald Heifetz, who is a leadership lecturer at Harvard, who is one of the people that developed this work, talks about an example of a technical challenge is if your child is playing sport on a Saturday and they break their arm, that's a technical challenge. You go to the hospital, you see a doctor. There is an x-ray, the bone is reset, a cast is put on for six weeks or eight weeks, then there's physiotherapy and you go back to normal.

So, we are still solving technical challenges, but what we're seeing as a result of VUCA are what are called adaptive challenges. And they're very different. So, an adaptive challenge has very different characteristics. The problem is hard to define. There's often no one clear solution to an adaptive challenge. It's easy to resist or ignore, because it generates disequilibrium and avoidance. It has a longer timeframe than a technical challenge. People need to solve adaptive challenges through a process of experimentation. So, there's no formula or expertise that tells you to just follow steps 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5. You have to experiment and navigate. And leaders need to be able to sustain what they're called productive discomfort. So, this is where there's this level of discomfort about needing to change, but it stays in a productive space rather than a destructive space.

So, we are facing many adaptive challenges right now. So COVID was a good example of an adaptive challenge. As a result of COVID, we've got hybrid working, which is also an adaptive challenge that's being faced by the workforce around the world. As I said, AI is a good example of an adaptive challenge, as is climate change. So, often, the change catalyst is also an adaptive challenge. What Ronald Heifetz talks about is an adaptive challenge looks different in the... Let's say we're back at that story about my child breaks their arm at sport on a Saturday. I go to the hospital, I have an x-ray. The X-ray reveals that there's something else going on, as well as the break. And then I have to go through a series of different experts to understand that my child's got a permanent arm injury and may not write again and may not get the full use of their arm, and that it may go on for years. And so, now we've got an adaptive challenge. We've got something that is hard to define, that there's often no one clear solution. I might have to make changes at home.

They might have to learn to write with the other hand. They might not be able to go to school. They might do physical therapy, there might be in pain. So, what we end up with there is an adaptive challenge where it's not solved per se, but we have to keep adapting in the face of the challenge. Now this is where constructive conflict becomes really important, because when it comes to an adaptive challenge, no one person has the answer. There is no one person on the planet who had the answer to COVID. There's no one person on the planet that has the answer to hybrid working. Even though I might think I have the answer to hybrid working in a way that works for me, actually none of us do. None of us have the answer to how we're all going to respond to AI or to climate change.

And so, this is where hearing the views of others and having different views or divergent views helps us to understand the problem or the opportunity, the challenge, more broadly and more deeply than we could on our own. And so, if we are not addressing issues of conflict in the workplace around, for example, hybrid working, then we are possibly putting ourselves at risk of failing to adapt to the adaptive challenge. And so, this ability to sit down around a virtual or a real table and have a constructive debate or conflict around how we're going to respond or what we're going to do, is vital to helping us navigate this type of challenge. And to be able to do it continuously, because we have to evolve alongside the challenge itself. So, that's the world we're in.

And also, it's actually better for performance to have a team that is responding to challenges and responding to goals together using constructive conflict. So, VUCA is what's happening at a global level. What we also know from team dynamics and 50 years of research into team performance is that goal oriented teams or challenge oriented teams perform better than approval oriented teams. And I want to talk a little bit about that now, because I want to just bring this down a level now into, well, what does that mean for my team and how we work together? So, goal orientation in teams is actually a very well researched construct, as I said. There's decades of research here that's very consistent. It shows that typically in a traditional type of structure, the team orientation is that you might have, for example, team member A, B, and C as you're seeing on screen and they report to their manager.

And if that team is oriented on keeping the leader or the manager happy, that approval orientation that I spoke about earlier, then what happens in that space is that it's the leader or the manager who spends most of their time thinking about the adaptive challenge or the adaptive opportunity, not team member A, B, and C. So, you've got one person thinking about the challenge or the opportunity, rather than say a four. In high performing teams we have four brains thinking about the challenge or the opportunity and they're structured like this. It's the same team. You've still got team members A, B, and C, and you've still got the leader or the manager, but the thinking and the implicit structure in the team is not that you report to me and your job is to keep me happy and do what I say you've got to do. But actually, our role as a team is to hit that target or to solve that problem or to capitalize on that opportunity.

And I've got a different role in how we do that, but we're all aiming at the same thing. So, high performance orientation has everybody aiming at the goal. And that makes a big difference when it comes to conflict, because if you imagine that our goal is just using the topic of the moment, how do we respond to hybrid working or how do we find people in such a tight recruitment market, such a tight job market? If we've got a team that's oriented this way, what we can do is have a discussion between the four of us about what are all the options we can see to find another great person or to create a hybrid working environment that best serves the individuals as well as the organization. And when we have a constructive debate like this, four people thinking rather than one or none, then what we are much more likely to find is that, A, we get a better performance outcome because we know that teams perform better than individuals when it comes to decision making.

And B, that your team member A, B, and C and you as a leader feel much more engaged and invigorated and energized by that debate. Our really good team members, they want to help solve problems. They want to help capitalize on opportunities. And when we involve them in this way and create an environment of robust, constructive, but really high energy debate or conflict, what that does is really hold them at the edge. It makes them think, and that's what we want. We want people to think together. And so, when we structure ourselves for debate, it can be very, very powerful in terms of solving problems and capitalizing on opportunities.

So, as a team, it means that when we get together, and for one of a better term hammer things out, it means that the result that we are likely to land on or the result that we get to is likely going to be better than the one we could have got to, or not just us, but team member A, B, C or the leader or manager could ever have got to on their own. But what happens is we tend not to go here because there's some kind of concern around conflict. So, what I want to talk about now is what happens to you when there's issues of conflict. So, what we're going to talk about is how you go or where you go when conflict arises in the workplace. And then we're going to come back and look at how do we create this and manage ourselves at the same time, because conflict does not happen in a vacuum.

Even robust debate around let's say, for example, hybrid working, most of us are really passionate about it. We have a way of working that we know really, really suits our life now. And it could be quite different for team member A, B, and C. So, it's high stakes, it's very passionate, and so that obviously has a set of emotions and an energy that goes with it. And that is often the bigger goal, sorry, the bigger hurdle to actually surfacing conflict, is how it makes people feel. And that's what I want to talk about now. So, my question for you is, what tends to happen to you when conflict emerges? So, if you can imagine back or might not even be that far, if you think about a time when conflict has emerged in a room, it's better if it's an in-person room, although it can be virtual.

And you felt the conflict, so it was potentially unexpressed or it was destructive, or it was constructive, but it could have pendulumed into destructive at any minute. Think about the emotions that you experienced and the feelings that you experienced, and the energy that you experienced in your body at that time. Often people will say, I felt sick. Often people will say, I started to sweat or people will say I felt my entire body tense up. Or people will say, I started to feel sick down in front of my body. Or people will say I just wanted to get out of the room, I had to sit back and I had to try and create some physical space. So, when conflict emerges between us and other people, we feel it viscerally as well as in our head. And so, there's a whole set of thoughts that accompany as well.

And of course, this is not new news to you. There's a whole heap of science here and around our default responses to conflict, and they tend to fall into three categories and that's fight, flight, or freeze. So, I'd love to know on a poll, so David, if you wouldn't mind opening the poll, what is your default response to conflict? Now, the science around this is that we each have a default response to conflict, that it is typically housed in the amygdala, the reptilian part of our brain. And it is when we feel physical or emotional threat, this is the sense or the energy that we feel. So, for some of us we feel, so my default responses fight, for example. So, I feel like the way I want to protect myself is to get involved and control the situation and fight.

For other people it's flight. So, the way that they protect themselves is to get out of the situation, to get away. So, to fly, to leave the room or to avoid the issue in some way. So, that can be physically wanting to leave the room or you can go into daydreaming, for example. So, you mentally leave the room. Freeze is where people feel frozen in space. They don't feel fight, they don't feel flight, they just want to sit and not be noticed. And we see all three of these responses in nature among animals of all kinds. All animals seem to have a default response to what they perceive as an attack, and we see it across the board. So, I'd love to know what your default response is. And if you're not sure, you can just put, I don't know. How are we going for responses there, David?

CCH Learning:

Yeah, most folks have had to go. Deb, I'll close that now and share it. So, we've got 54% are opting for option A, fight.

Deborah Assheton:

Yep.

CCH Learning:

31% option B, 15% option C. And everybody seems to know how they feel. No options for option D.

Deborah Assheton:

Yeah. Okay, thanks, David. So, we are typically very good at self-assessing what our default response to conflict is. There's no right or wrong, and no one response is better than the other. And again, research shows that actually with the capability for us exists to do all three. So, those who said the 31% who said flight are also capable of flight and freeze and vice versa. So, there's nothing wrong with these. But what we do want to understand and take responsibility for is that none of these three are helpful in the workplace, in that generally speaking your life's not in danger. And whilst we feel like fight, flight, or freezes, that they're actually not a healthy response to matters of conflict and issues of conflict in the workplace generally speaking.

Now, I'm going to put a caveat on that. If you are in an environment where there is destructive conflict and you do not feel psychologically safe, then flight is probably a way to get yourself out of the room if you can, is quite healthy. Fighting is probably not. And freezing might also be healthy in that you just stay there and wait it out. So, like I said, there's nothing bad about these responses. They save our lives, but they're not necessarily conducive to navigating difficult issues in the workplace. So, we don't want these to be in the driver's seat of how we actually step in and respond a lot of the time. And typically, when it comes to conflict or just generally speaking, any situation, we have four options for the way that we can behave or four buckets in terms of the types of behaviour that we can demonstrate.

And so, I want to show you those here. And these become particularly important when we are processing difficult emotions, which of those associated with conflict? So, the two options on the outside are repress or explode. So, when we are processing difficult emotions like fear or if we're worried about speaking up, if we're worried about losing our job, if we're worried about being shut down, so that psychological safety's not there, or somebody's treating us in a way that's personal and inappropriate, we can do two things here. We can repress that, we can push it down and say, well, I'm just going to ignore it, I'm going to pretend it doesn't exist. Or we can explode, which is where we let fly and maybe say things that we later regret, or behave in a way that actually gets us into some form of trouble or doesn't service us at all.

So, out of the four categories, these are two that we generally don't want to choose too often, because obviously the closet gets full here as you can see in this picture. And as you guys probably know, once this is full, we can be in a cycle where repression builds up and builds up and builds up to the point where we explode. And that's a difficult experience, often ends badly, and then so we go back into the repression cycle. So, again, you can spend a long time here in the workplace, that's not what we want to do. The better options are to what's called express or experience. So, expressing is where we talk about an issue. Rocket science, I know, but it's where we talk about the issue of conflict. An experience is where, and I've got this little meditating person here just because I like them floating really, but you can experience many different ways, which I'll talk about in the moment.

Experience is where we notice that visceral impact of conflict on our body and just let it flow. So, we experience it, we experience feeling sick, we experience the fear, we experience the anxiety, the tension, the butterflies and just let it pass. We don't whip onto it at all. Now, it's easier said than done, but we can experience through meditating but we can also experience through going for a walk. Often, people experience through going for a job or journaling, or there can be a range of ways that people do this. But in the workplace, out of the four, the one most suited to the workplace is expression with a little bit of experiencing as well. So, when we are talking about expressing, what we're doing is talking about the issue of conflict, talking about it. And this is where into constructive conflict.

So, constructive conflict is where we take responsibility for talking about the adaptive challenge or the problem or the person, whatever the issue of conflict is. And we talk about it in a way that navigates us toward a solution or at least an improvement. So, the hallmarks of constructive conflict are very, very healthy. So, it's where we have debate that's focused on ideas or could be outcomes. It's in service of improvement. So, we're not having a

discussion because I don't like you and I want to prove that you're wrong. We're having a discussion because we want to get better together. So, it's in service of improvement. It's equitable in that the people in the room share the same power dynamic. I'll come back to that in a moment. It's respectful, so it doesn't go below the line and fall into destructive space. It's iterative, so our ideas and our thinking build on each other.

So, David might have a suggestion that I then build on that somebody else then builds on again. So, we are navigating, we're finding a way and that's iterative. There's a sense of shared ownership that we're working on this together. The high performance orientation is exactly that diagram that I put up is what that shared ownership looks like, where all four of us own in different ways, because we've got different roles, but we own how this team's getting to that goal or how this team overcomes that challenge. We're looking for optimal solution or solutions. It's not about perfection. In an adaptive challenge particularly there's no such thing as perfect. There's just not. There's no perfect way to respond to COVID. Nobody did it perfectly around the world. There's no perfect way to respond to AI. And the fact is that we actually in an adaptive challenge, we have to keep responding.

It in and of itself is iterative. And often, with the matters of conflict, we have to respond to those iteratively as well. So, what's optimal today might not be optimal in three months. And this is particularly true when we're working with difficult clients and we love our clients, and at the same time some of them are very difficult, but we're working on one step at a time optimal solutions. And when I say one step at a time, I don't mean loose, unstructured, lackadaisical approaches, I mean structured approaches that serve us for a month or two at a time and then we structure it differently again. So, we are responding and navigating in a way that's quite process oriented, that has some structure and rigor around it. It's not a lost wandering. And of course, it's inclusive. The hallmarks of constructive conflict are that we are thinking together as a team.

And when we have this robust debate, that is what it sounds like when a group of people are thinking. The only way we can think together is to share different points of view and then have a robust debate about those, because I can't see what you are thinking. So, we have to express. So, how do we do this? How do we create and make constructive conflict safe? How do we make constructive conflict versus destructive conflict or unexpressed conflict? So, let's talk about how we do this. Number one, as a leader, we need to be explicit about wanting debate. And I'm going to show you how we frame this in a moment in the last section of today. So, let's say you've got a conflict around workload, for example. You've got lots of people. You know that there's a lot of workload on, people are putting on a lot of hours for too long, and that it's an issue of unexpressed conflict.

So, when we talk about being explicit about wanting debate, that sounds like the leader saying something along the lines of, "I know that workloads have been really high for the last couple of months, unacceptably high. And I'd like to have a discussion about it and a debate about what you think we could do differently." So, what we're doing is surfacing the issue, but being explicit about wanting to debate it. Not to solve it, not to fix it, to improve it, yes, but to debate it, to have a discussion about it, which of course, can open up conflict. We also want to ask for difference. So, you might have five people in the room and you hear four views that all sound pretty same or four options that sound very similar.

One of the things you can do is say to the fifth person, "Deb, I'd like to hear from you what you think that's different to what we've already heard." Or you can throw that challenge to the room to say, "Okay, I'm hearing a lot of consensus. What different opinions do people have that they haven't shared yet?" So, we want to ask the difference, not sameness, because in the sameness there's no conflict. It's really important that we schedule time for debate if it's needed in meeting agendas. So, if we have a meeting that goes for an hour and I see the agenda, because I know you all have agendas for your meetings, and there's 12 items on the agenda for a 60-minute meeting, then I know that implicitly this meeting is about pace. 12 items, five minutes each, it's an update.

If however, we've got a meeting and it's scheduled for 60 minutes and there's one item or two items, plus there's some pre-work, I'm thinking then I know implicitly that this is about debate, that this is about discussion, that there's some depth to this. Now, there's nothing wrong with your 12 items in 60 minutes, but that's not an environment that creates debate. So, if you want to have a debate about an issue, you have to schedule the appropriate amount of time. Again, it's not three days. A lot of really important issues can make a lot of progress in a 60-minute meeting. You might need to have two or three spread maybe a week apart each or three or four days apart to let people drip feed and then come back, or to take some actions in between. But you can actually solve big issues with regular meetings to discuss and debate.

And this is what we saw, for the most part we saw executive teams do very well in COVID, was ongoing debate about what do we do next, what do we do next, what do we do next. And that was the topic for the meeting. Frame debate and hold it in play. So, I'll talk about framing in a moment, but holding it in play is about keeping it going, so rather than shutting it down or resisting, or just going into consensus too quickly. So, when we talk about holding in play, what we talk about is some of the things that are higher up on that screen, asking for difference. What are the risks we haven't thought of? Who's got a different idea? Who's thought of something that they haven't shared? What if we are wrong about that? What options might we have?

So, what you are doing as a leader is holding debate in play rather than steering it towards consensus too quickly, which is what we tend to do. We tend to move there a little bit too quickly. Increased participation rate. So, if you've got the situation where you've got 10 people in your team and there's only four people contributing, then that's not good for constructive conflict. You'd want to actually make it more constructive or more conflicting by having as much participation as possible. So, what I suggest you do there is you say to your team, "Okay, we're going to go around the room and we've got three minutes each to talk so that we get turn taking, which is great for participation."

And you also want to create an environment where different thinking is actively sought and valued. So, again, you can position this, which I'm going to go through now, as I would like us to think differently today about this client who we're all experiencing problems with. We love this client and they're very difficult to deal with for these reasons, and I'd love us to think differently today about how we can better support them. Very constructive. And it gets people out of the whinge factor around a client, for example. So, we can make or create constructive conflict and that's what we want to be able to do as a leader on these appropriate issues or where you come up, where it emerges as unexpressed conflict. What we don't want to do is let it sit in that unexpressed place.

So, I'd love to know, and this is a free text response that David's going to help me moderate, what is the current issue of conflict in your workplace? So, is it difficult clients or is it hybrid working, or is it workload, or is it all three? Or is it, I don't know, technology, or just in a short, sharp sentence or even in one or two words, what's an issue of conflict in your workplace? And while you're doing that, I'm going to talk about framing. So, when we've got conflict of ideas or conflict of thinking around what we should do and sometimes conflict between people as well, how we frame that conflict is very important. It's also very practical. So, typically, what leaders can do is to when they frame or they don't frame very well, and what they do is that they just jump straight into the issue of conflict.

So, they might say, "Look, I've heard that there's been some winging about workload." Not the way to start the conversation. Or, "I think we should do hybrid working this way," or, "I've made a decision about hybrid working and this is how we're going to do it." So, that's not ideal framing for issues of conflict. And what that tends to do is send us into a space of unexpressed or destructive conflict. So, let's have a look at what some of the issues of conflict are. David, if you could just share them with me, then I'll talk about some framing examples.

CCH Learning:

Yeah, sure. Deb, you're on the money, some of your examples there around hybrid work, return to offer conversations, some folks perhaps wanting to work more remotely and the conflicting business goals around that, that might suggest that it would be better to have folks in the office. There's definitely one or two on that. And the other is you referenced earlier recruitment issues. I guess this is a corollary to that. It's the fact that there's a certain number of people that are required to do the work and the workload is not reducing, but sometimes there aren't enough folks-

Deborah Assheton:

Yeah, they're resourcing.

CCH Learning:

... to do it. And the other one you actually touched on just in your last couple of slides is workload, in the sense that for a lot of the folks on the line, end of financial year, and the subsequent tax season brings with it a spike if you like, in workload and not always able to change staffing to address that. So, that's a couple of the themes.

Deborah Assheton:

Great, thank you. So, let's have a look. Some of them I've got some examples on. So, when we are framing, what we want to frame is we want to frame with the people in mind, the people that we're talking to in mind as human beings. So, the relationship, the relational aspect, we want to frame that. It doesn't matter what the issue of conflict is, but we want to build relationship with people as we work with them, especially when we're working with them on a tough issue. And so, that can be things like, I know let's say hybrid working is important to everyone here and that there are a number of views about it. Or I want to acknowledge that we have a massive workload issue right now and that the situation needs to be better managed. Or it could be something like, I feel like there's not been enough discussion about the tension around our business goals despite it being a really big issue for us now.

So, that's the relational half the frame. And then there's also this performance aspect, which is the performance aspect is the, we need to talk about it and I'm expecting you to do that really well. So, this is you setting a benchmark around how this issue of conflict is going to be dealt with and you are leading it. So, I know that hybrid working is a really important topic to everyone here and that there's a number of views about it. I would like us to hear and debate these different points of view with a view to finding a way forward. Or I'd like us to robustly generate new ways of responding to the challenge around workload. Or it might be, I want to open this meeting to debate and discuss how you're feeling and what your suggestions are for responding to whatever the topic might be.

So, you're not promising that everyone's going to get what they want, but what you're doing is opening it up for discussion and debate. And it's a world of and, not but. So, what we are doing when we frame, and obviously you're going to have copies of these, is we're making two statements that we're joining together. I know this topic's really important to everyone and that there's a number of views or that there's not been enough discussion about workload or under resourcing. And it's a really big issue for us right now. And I'd like us to robustly generate new ways of responding to the challenge. Now, obviously, they're my words, but that's the essence of framing conflict really well.

And then establishing some ground rules and the ground rules for how you have a debate, whether it's with three people or 18 or 30. I don't suggest that you do 30 for your first attempt. By the way, I know you're all high performers and all, but work your way up, is the ground rules are really very simple. They're not rocket science. We let everyone finish speaking. We agree to contribute. They may be turn taking. Once an idea is shared, it's our idea to explore and build on. So, it's not Deb's idea. There's no shutdowns. We don't shut each other down here. The idea is to hear difference. The goal is to find a way. It's not to win, it's not to be right, it's not to lobby or coerce. And you want to state whether today's about debate or decision making. So, often with something like hybrid working, it's about debate and decision making is done by the leader or leadership team, or the owner of the firm separately. So, you want to be clear about that upfront.

So, what you can do from this point is take whatever the issue of conflict is and put it into this framework, and hopefully that provides you with a really practical way to set up a conversation with another person or with a small or medium-sized team. So, what we want to do with conflict is create the shifts from avoiding conflict or seeing it as bad or tolerating low grade conflict in the workplace, ignoring tension or rushing to solutions, especially yours. And shifting to intentionally framing robust debate to seeing conflict, constructive conflict, as a way to help you solve your problems and to have people feel like they're a part of the solution and part of the debate, and part of improvement, and actually getting everyone to contribute to that. And to integrate that thinking and those options into the decisions that you make, which will generally mean that you make better decisions and that you execute them better. So, that's it for me today. I want to allow a little bit of time for questions. So, I'm going to hand back to you, David, to moderate the questions.

CCH Learning:

Thank you very much Deb. And I will just remind everybody of the process there in terms of how to do that. So, let me get my screen back up. Hopefully, that's working there. And we're back with camera also. So, if you have any questions for Deb and you'd like to just unleash your fingers on the keyboard, you can open up the questions pane in your GoTo Webinar panel, type in your question and click send. We'll collect those up on this end and we can make use of the last few minutes we have together to try and address some of those for you. So, let's have a look. Let me just get this straight. Yes. So, I think it would help my team to make a shift around conflict and to start to talk about it with them. How do you suggest I do that?

Deborah Assheton:

So, good question. So, where do we start? I suggest that you pick a topic that is important right now, pertinent, timely, relevant, but not too huge, and you set up a meeting. And you allow plenty of time, like an hour or whatever you think is a relevant amount of time to debate that. And I would send out some instructions and reflection questions in an email prior to the meeting. And I wouldn't necessarily use the word conflict. I'd just say, look, I want us to discuss it. I want to have a robust debate. I'd like you to bring all your passion and all your opinions to it, and so that there's a sense of energy around it. And then I would use the framing techniques that I just showed you and some of the previous practical slides to help you hold it in play.

CCH Learning:

Okay. There's another one here, which is referencing some of the stuff you touched on early in the session about adaptive challenges and whether there's any way somebody could find out a bit more about adaptive challenges and examples of those.

Deborah Assheton:

So, the source is there, it's Ronald Heifetz and Martin Linsky from Harvard. If you Google Ronald Heifetz, there's loads of TED Talks and other YouTube talks from him. They've also written a number of books on adaptive leadership. So, there's plenty of reference material if you Google either of them or want to read their books on adaptive challenges.

CCH Learning:

Okay, thank you. There's another one here relating to also something you touched on early on, which is where you do raise something that could potentially lead to conflict and you're concerned about consequences that might flow from that. You talked about this idea, creating a safe environment to discuss psychological safety, and any recommendations about where folks might go to learn a little bit more about how to create that environment so that the negative consequences don't [inaudible 01:00:36].

Deborah Assheton:

Sure. So, the global expert on psychological safety is a woman called Amy Edmondson. E-D-M-O-N, Edmondson, I think it's S-O-N. Again, she's at Harvard. She's been studying psychological safety for almost 40 years. She has some fabulous TED Talks. So, if you google her, and you can share those with your team. And what you learned in a 10 minute Ted Talk from her, you're tapping into 40 years of expertise. She's very compelling and that is where I would start.

CCH Learning:

Okay, great. And then timing wise, coming back to what we touched on just a moment ago, with us coming up to what's potentially quite a deadline driven time of year for some of the audience, would you recommend holding off on this conversation and changing the approach until the workload has peaked and subsided? Or would you suggest getting on the front foot and starting to have these conversations as you head into all this mayhem?

Deborah Assheton:

Yeah. Look, it's a really good question and I think there's a nuance to it. So, there can be some smarts in waiting until after it's done and then having a debate about how you do it better next year. But my tendency, depending on your team, would probably be to have it now ahead of time before you get into the mayhem next month. So, I'm not an accountant, but I'm assuming that June is like the June, July, the big month. So, it might be that you actually frame it now to say, I know that you know, that we're going into this period under resourced and I'd like us to talk about how we want to handle it. So, you take the unexpressed potential conflict off the table by talking about it now. Yeah, that's probably the way I'd do it.

CCH Learning:

Yeah, no, and I guess you can always circle back post session for a review in a few months time to say, how did we do and how could we do it better next year?

Deborah Assheton:

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, you just want to have a practice of opening up and surfacing the important issues because that leads to other people doing it as well. So, it's healthy generally.

CCH Learning:

100%. Okay. Well, I think that brings us to the end of the questions or certainly those that are in the box at the moment. I've put a couple of upcoming topics that are there on the screen for you now, but of course, you'll find those also on your homepage when you sign in where there's a full listing of all upcoming topics. But a couple that are on the agenda for tomorrow that might be of interest for some folks, the account receivable and cash flow modelling, and work-related hotspot expenses, both of those have proofed pretty popular and promised to be very interesting, particularly the cash flow modelling session in the morning. So, you might want to have a look at those.

Other than that, all that remains is for me to thank Deb for her contribution today. And of course, you've got contact details on the slide there if you need to get in touch with Deb for anything further or if you've got additional questions or clarification around today's content, feel free to reach out. But thank you all for attending. And thank you, Deb, for your contribution today. Please, as you leave, it would be great to get your input on how we did so we can keep improving. Thanks, everybody. Have a great afternoon.