THOSE ELEPHANTS IN THE ROOM

The topic of team conflict has been a passion for me, and one I take seriously on behalf of the teams I work with. As easy as we might seem to grasp the word "conflict" rather intuitively, the actual tackling of the topic with teams has been conversely challenging, inspiring and perplexing all in one.

In my work, I often find that teams have great difficulty dealing with the topic both of facing and managing conflict. Initially, connotations of the word itself arouse negative associations – something to be feared or something that we should avoid. In action, conflict is a powerful primary driver for teams to move forward and to learn, assuming that they become "conflict competent".

At the real core of the challenge is that individual team members are often perplexed in separating "task conflict" from "personal/relationship conflict". Task conflict being disagreements on the work a team is performing, and personal/relationship conflict characterized by heightened, negative emotions amongst each other.

Even when working deeply with a team's Hogan Diagnostic and specifically the dark sides of personality and consequently the human triggers to these areas (often being others in the team, what I call team-member-personality-allergies), the division between "are you putting ME down" vs. "are you challenging my content" is hard to decipher.

In this context I try to facilitate the use of transparency by utilizing the idea of a team's "social reflectivity" which is demonstrated in the team's ability to promote the well-being of its members, discouraging "intention inventions" on each other's behalf i.e. I THINK I know what you mean by assumption as opposed to openly inquiring and exploring on each other's behalf to investigate what your intention might in "reality" be.

The Team's Dynamics

Another dynamic I have observed in this connection is a team's urge to move and think fast and the apparent counter-intuitive (yet very effective) approach to actually slowing down to reflect on the dynamics, seeking out understanding and clarification of potential conflicts in order to actually move even faster. In this light, I try wholeheartedly to encourage teams to think that focusing on their dynamics will be a major part of doing the "heavy lifting" when it comes to making progress. So, shifting the conversation towards exclusively pinpointing the way the team is interacting is a leading-edge parameter.

This process can be very tricky and requires a lot of courage to be the one to address potentially bad team dynamics and call out the "elephants in the room". Sitting in on a management meeting, I might choose to stop a team in its tracks when I sense an "elephant" that could potentially derail them, and I'll ask each participant to write down the dynamic that they sense.

Ironically, almost everyone manages to name quite precisely what the detrimental behaviour(s) is, what the name of the elephant is and even its size.

I find this dynamic genuinely intriguing... and mind boggling! What is preventing them from expressing what everyone seems to see and feel?

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The Interpersonal Risk-Taking Environment

My own hypothesis is that the interpersonal risk-taking environment in these cases is simply not yet evolved enough. The fear of being seen as putting others down, being thought of as a fool, getting ostracized or perhaps seen as weak or vulnerable can become the dominate inner dialogue in the team – what I call a "collective low self-esteem" of sorts. Enriched trust has of course a great deal to contribute as an antidote to this unspoken scenario. And the paradox of trust is that it is based on risk-taking. Someone must take that leap and show the way.

Upon reflection, it may appear then that the simple 2 syllable word of conflict, though easy to spell, pronounce and use in multiple contexts can quickly be defined, its underlayers have a much more complex and deeper influence on how team dynamics play or not play out.

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