

Keeping Disagreements from Escalating into Conflict

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Disagreement in your organization is often beneficial. Potentially improved ideas surface when people view the same circumstances differently. You've probably heard the adage that "when two people always agree, one of them is unnecessary."

However, when disagreement escalates into outright conflict, relationships suffer, and that is rarely good. You'll never eliminate conflict in your organization, of course, but you can certainly influence your culture in terms of how disagreement is handled.

"So what is it that causes disagreements to spiral into conflicts?" This quote comes from a research paper by Kathleen A. Kennedy and Emily Pronin of Princeton University, published in the June, 2008 issue of the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*. The article is entitled "When Disagreement Gets Ugly: Perceptions of Bias and the Escalation of Conflict."

Following are quotes from this recent scientific study that likely describes your experiences.

"Scholars have referred to a 'conflict spiral' whereby adversaries take turns aggressing against each other, each believing that the conflict began with the other side's offenses and that their own actions are merely a defensive response."

"Research suggests that people are inclined to view other people as biased, even while they fail to recognize their own biases....People tend to see those who disagree with them as biased....Indeed, research shows that people exaggerate others' biases."

"People will impute bias to an opponent...when that opponent disagrees with them."

"Conflict researchers have outlined two key ways in which people respond to disagreement: conflict-escalating *competitive* behavior and conflict deescalating *cooperative* behavior.

"People's tendency to perceive an adversary as biased rather than objective made them more likely to prefer competitive versus cooperative approaches to that adversary....Competitive approaches are indeed more conflict escalatory."

It's likely that when disagreements arise in your organization, at least one of the parties believes, "I have a sound basis for the way I see this issue, but the other party is surprisingly self-focused and deceived."

When both parties have such a perspective, two things happen. First, the disagreement silently and imperceptibly shifts from the issue at hand to a debate about who is more objective, who cares more, and who sees the situation and its implications more clearly. Neither party recognizes this insidious change in focus, yet the escalation has begun. The opportunity to defend or justify "my position" is far more deceptively intriguing than the original disagreement. Emotions begin to supersede logic.

Secondly, each party interprets defensive statements by the other party as implied attacks. As quoted above, "adversaries take turns aggressing against each other, each believing that the conflict began with the other side's offenses and that their own actions are merely a defensive response." Each seemingly logical statement by one party feels inflammatory to the other.

What can you do when you are involved as a participant to stop the escalation of conflict?

The biggest single counsel I suggest is to exercise deep commitment to remaining intentionally and consciously aware of what is happening. If you lose that discernment, the potential for your emotions and your own biases taking control is huge!

1. Acknowledge, at least to yourself, that you have biases. Yes, they exist, but they won't be obvious to you. Seek silently yet determinedly to identify them. Imagine how they must appear to the other party.
2. Intensely resist the temptation to enumerate the biases of the other party. Doing so will divert attention away from the main issue, the basis of the disagreement.
3. Periodically, confirm or redefine the issue being evaluated. As a leader, keeping the main issue the clear focus of your conversation is primarily your responsibility. Remember, "A problem well stated is a problem half solved." (Charles Kettering, engineer, inventor, businessman)
4. "Seek first to understand" the conflicting perspective. Yes, this particular approach from among Stephen Covey's *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* is very powerful at this point! Repetitively, and in a variety of ways, work to articulate a description of the other party's perspective, to the point where he or she confesses that you've expressed it more clearly than he or she was able.

I suggest taking out a piece of paper and actively making notes. Be very sensitive that you keep any tonality of judgment or sarcasm out of your voice. Your role as a leader is always to generate clarity out what may initially seem quite ambiguous.

5. Intentionally pursue conflict deescalating, cooperative behaviors. If you don't consciously seek these, powerful emotions will take over, leading you toward conflict escalating, uncooperative behaviors.

My purpose in this article has been to prevent the escalation of disagreement into a more severe conflict. "Conflict Resolution," an important and related concept, is addressed in two articles housed in the "Article Archives" section of my website.

Consider filing all three articles in a location that is accessible for easy reference. Review them often, and shamelessly pull them out for guidance when you become engaged in a disagreement!

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