



BOOSTING IMMUNITY TO TEAM CONFLICT

HOW STRAIGHT TALK CAN HELP DEVELOP MORE HARMONIOUS GLOBAL TEAMS

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Team conflict can add value or destroy it. Good conflict fosters respectful debate and yields mutually agreed-upon solutions that are often far superior to those first offered. Bad conflict occurs when team members simply can't get past their differences, killing productivity and stifling innovation.

All executive teams confront troublesome interpersonal differences – even teams that are superficially similar. But increasing team diversity adds complexity to team dynamics. In diverse teams, differences in personality are liable to be amplified or distorted by differences in culture, gender or professional experience.

The conventional approach to working through such differences is reactive. Managers try to upgrade team capabilities in conflict resolution or discuss behavioral evidence, such as 360 feedback. These approaches often allow frustrations to build up for too long, making it difficult to reset negative impressions and rebuild trust.

Proactivity

A more effective approach is to surface those differences upfront, to immunize the team against the negative impact of diversity. Based on our work with leadership teams we have developed a simple tool that empowers managers to facilitate team discussions unaided (see Big Five Conversations Sidebar).

Sidebar: BIG FIVE TEAM CONVERSATIONS	
DIMENSIONS	PROMPTS
<p>LOOK</p> <p>Sample question: In your world, what external characteristics do people attach importance to (e.g. gender, seniority, class)?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What visible or invisible (education, experience, connections) credentials do people value? • Do people play up or play down status differences? • How would you determine your standing in the team? • Besides the leader, who else might initiate discussion? • Who might be inhibited?
<p>ACT</p> <p>Sample question: In your world, how important are time boundaries in meetings?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do participants respect start and finish times for meetings? • When would the meeting get started: immediately after the formal introductions; after coffee and small talk; or as soon as the highest ranking individual enters the room? • Is turning up late or missing a meeting a problem? • Is taking a call or interrupting a meeting acceptable?
<p>SPEAK</p> <p>Sample question: In your world, are there situations when yes means no?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent are directness and clarity valued over nuance and face saving? • How much is irony or understatement used? • Is a promise considered an aspiration or a guarantee?
<p>THINK</p> <p>Sample question: In your world, how do people view risk, uncertainty and deviations from plan?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is uncertainty viewed as a threat or an opportunity? • Would you prefer: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To tolerate risk or to avoid errors? ▪ To try to plan everything in advance or to work through trial and error? ▪ To look at the big picture or to delve into the details? ▪ To be flexible or to be persistent and to follow through?
<p>FEEL</p> <p>Sample question: In your world, how would I know that you disagree with me?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are emotions displayed? • How is confrontation viewed: healthy, useful, necessary, harmful, to be avoided? • Are challenge and dissent tolerated, expected, encouraged and dealt with in public or discussed offline? • Do you signal disagreement directly (“you’re wrong”) or indirectly (through silence, body language, use of humor or a third party)?

Tested with Global 500 corporations, the approach accelerates team development in three ways: making the behavior of colleagues more predictable; creating trust through disclosure; and increasing awareness of diverse contributions.

Five conversations

The framework surfaces the most troublesome differences, relating to how other team members look, act, speak, think and feel.

Look: Spot the difference

Colleagues typically make fast judgments about relative status/competence based on how others look: their age, gender, race or nationality. Greater diversity generates more labels, in the form of stereotypes. Left unchallenged those preconceptions can hurt collaboration.

A heavy engineering company we studied added a designer to its international board. From the first meeting, it was clear this person had a different take on many issues. After that first meeting, some board members were already expressing doubts about the value of the designer's contributions – heightened by the fact she was the only woman on the team.

Act: Misjudging behavior

Diverse teams bring together people with different habits. Seemingly trivial behavioral transgressions – epitomized by the issue of time boundaries in team meetings – can have a disproportionate impact, sometimes aggravating stereotypes, alienating colleagues and disrupting communication flows.

A global leader in the food processing industry was experiencing recurrent tensions in the top team. Through discussion, it emerged that the international executives were deeply frustrated by the lack of urgency in team meetings – a frustration that sometimes triggered brusqueness which upset their domestic colleagues. Having verbalized the problem, the team was able to set new meeting rules to engage more productively.

Speak: Divided by a common language

Diverse teams may be lulled into a false sense of similarity by their fluency in a shared language. But deeper differences in how team members express themselves are common sources of conflict, notably the “veiled no” and the “false yes”. Both can be very damaging to trust for people accustomed to more literal meanings. Conversely, too much directness can also erode trust.

Tensions in the leadership team of a pharma company we worked with centered on perceived unreliability. Offline discussions with the two antagonists revealed culturally different views about what was agreed: to one party, a promise constituted an aspiration; to the other, a “firm commitment”.

Think: Occupying distant thought zones

Unexpected differences in how team members think about the context often generate conflict. Team members can differ widely in their tolerance for risk/uncertainty, the importance of planning and willingness to deviate from plan.

Repeated clashes between two directors in the top team of UK hospital. He a medical doctor; she a professional manager. But the key to their long-running hostilities turned out to be wide differences in personality scores on “openness”: one favoring “big picture” thinking, the other more detail-oriented.

Feel: Minding the emotional gap

Team members may grow irritated with colleagues who show too little emotion or too much of the wrong kind. Colleagues can vary greatly in their levels of comfort with public disagreement – and hence misjudge the opposition to a particular issue.

The incoming CEO of a global insurance group assembled a new top team to tackle a turnaround challenge. Finding the team too cautious in its discussions, the CEO asked a coach to intervene. The team adopted the “fish on the table” metaphor to broach awkward issues – and learned the difference between “straight talk” and emotionally charged “fight talk”.

Beyond awareness

Step one is to use conversations to raise awareness of differences. Step two is to discuss how to deal with those differences and which ones require some form of agreement to ensure colleagues play by the same rules.

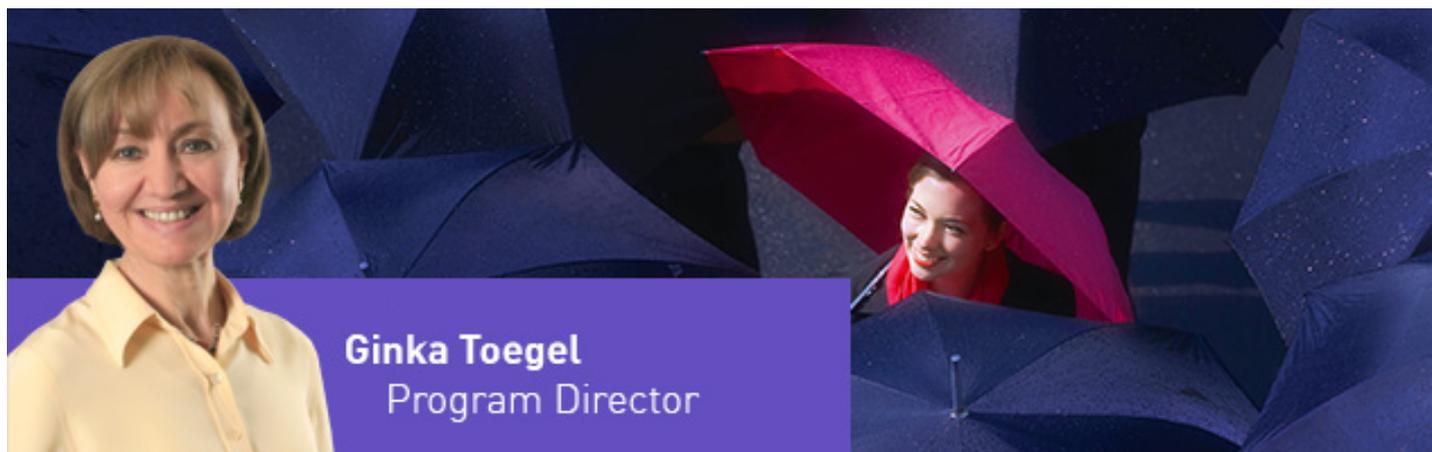
The benefits of anticipating and heading off conflict with the big five team conversations before it becomes destructive are immense. We’ve found that they include greater participation, improved creativity, and, ultimately, smarter decision making. As one manager put it: “We still disagree, but there’s less bad blood and a genuine sense of valuing each other’s contributions.”

Find out more about this methodology in our recent article on the subject in [Harvard Business Review](#).

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