



Managing Organizational Tension – No Pain, No Gain **By Leigh A. McGee**

When people work together, there will be tension and conflict between individuals and groups from time to time. It is inevitable. If left unmanaged, tension and conflict may inflict unnecessary pain through internal struggles and in the worst scenarios long term strife to the organization.

Now imagine a chief executive going into the boardroom to announce, “Conflict, tension, and pain are sometimes good for the organization. I will use organizational tension as the driver for my strategic plans. My vision is to build internal systems that manage conflict instinctively while fueling innovation and continual improvement.”

What would you think of this announcement? Could organizational tension actually be good for a business?

This paper sheds light on how internal conflict can be a powerful source for finding fresh solutions and making important improvements. Leaders should acknowledge that the pain conflict causes through bouts of disagreement and heated debate may be a spark of opportunity.

The Nature of Conflict

Conflict is the natural outcome of disagreement often resulting from individuals or groups with differing beliefs, desires, or frame of references. Conflict produces a situation for finding resolution through negotiation or creating destruction through a costly battle. When addressed early, a conflict can be resolved more easily than those which are long standing. If conflicts rise to the level of battling, the organization will lose and everyone in it will suffer. Oftentimes in long term conflicts, no one remembers how it began.

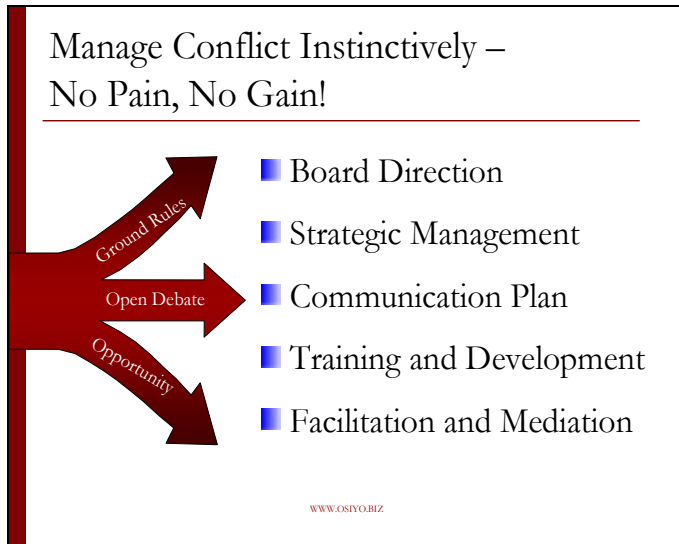
Therefore, the best option for leaders is to design internal systems that manage conflict instinctively by 1) establishing ground rules for resolving differences constructively, 2) empowering the organization to embrace the opportunities that conflict provides, and 3) creating situations for continual and productive debate.

Design the Organization to Manage Conflict Instinctively

Organizational design experts notoriously say that every organization is perfectly designed to produce its outcomes, whatever they may be. In other words, nothing is an accident. Metaphorically speaking, design your business as an organism that expands and contracts as pressure valves reduce the opportunities for major conflict and discontent. Purposefully then, the organization will be designed to encourage thoughtful disagreement focused on superior outcomes rather than personal threats. In doing so, time and money must be appropriated to produce effective programs, such as:

- **Corporate Direction** - The Board should set the example for the organization with a unified vision, clear direction, and guiding principles for working together.
- **Strategic Management** – Everyone likes to feel that they are a part, no matter how small, of controlling their destiny. Include as many managers and staff in the strategic planning process as possible. Open and inclusive planning sessions create buy-in to the corporate direction at all levels.
- **A Communication Plan with Ground Rules for Open Dialogue** - Design a communication plan that is free flowing from the bottom up, top down, and in between. Effective communication is planned, diligently executed, and tested for accuracy of messages. Work to create a culture that meets disagreement head-on with ground rules for open debate and professional behavior. A differing opinion should be as appreciated as a supportive comment.
- **Training and Development** - Ensure that the entire organization (Board, Management, and Staff) is trained in effective communication techniques and has the ability to recognize critical conversations and proceed with care.

- **Facilitation and Mediation** – Professional facilitators are trained to ask the hard questions and push groups to make tough decisions. When appropriate, have a third party facilitate the discussion or mediate an important negotiation.



Outcomes of Successfully Managed Conflict

When purposefully designed systems with structure, procedures, and processes are in place, discussions are elevated beyond personal likes and dislikes. Conversations can be based on an already agreed upon strategy or framework. The discussion is more likely then to be about standards and options.

Organizations designed to manage conflict produce executives who view creativity, adaptability, and innovation as the keys to success. They also produce employees who feel free to disagree within boundaries and valuable to the outcomes of the organization. Managers and staff generally do not expect a perfect organization with orderly meetings, clear solutions, and no conflict. Even though uncomfortable at times, these individuals and groups confront conflict head-on placing equivalent value on their own goals and the relationship/s involved.

Closing

Organizational conflict, when managed effectively, can improve decision making, illuminate varying options, and ignite the creation of innovative products. Through the pain that comes with conflict, the organization gains an opportunity to improve. Maybe that’s what the scribe of “No Pain – No Gain,” was talking about.

About the Author

Ms. McGee is a co-founder of Osiyo Communications LLC, an American Indian owned management consulting company. Recently named by Diversity Business as one of the “Top 500 Diversity Owned Businesses in the United States,” Osiyo was founded with a single purpose – to help make businesses more self-reliant, sustainable, and valuable. Osiyo helps clients improve organizational performance by developing clear direction, utilizing strategic thinking, and building sustainable operations with strong capabilities.

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