

WILEY



The Healthy Side of Conflict

See how one leadership team discovered how to leverage healthy conflict to achieve collective success.

A Success Story featuring :



Are your teams masters of conflict, or do they avoid it at all costs?

Conflict is often considered taboo, especially in the workplace. Some people may spend time and energy trying to avoid conflict, while others may just ignore it altogether. This leads to an unhealthy cycle that allows conflict to reoccur without resolution, ultimately breaking down team communication and work relationships.

Some managers believe that a conflict-free workplace is a healthy workplace. However, creating artificial harmony can be just as damaging as having unhealthy, unresolved conflict in a team environment. Beneath the surface, teams may struggle with dysfunction and conflict that prevents them from performing at a higher level. No matter how uncomfortable it might be to address conflict, it's important to remember that conflict is normal and natural. In fact, *New York Times* best-selling author Patrick Lencioni found that conflict plays a critical role in the success of high-performing teams.

Mike Thomas, the General Manager of Clayton County Water Authority (CCWA), always tried to protect his team from conflict. But with a leadership team of 15 people, he struggled with getting the variety of personalities to work well together. The team was not aligned and lacked confidentiality; people didn't feel safe enough to share their true opinions. This held back the entire team from achieving collective results.

As the team leader, Thomas often had to intervene between frustrated department

managers. He knew that if his team had the right strategies, they could approach conflict in a positive way without his help.

Thomas read the popular teamwork fable, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* by Patrick Lencioni. He easily identified with the story and recognised similar issues with this team. He worked with Pat Heinzerling, the Training and Leadership Development Coordinator at CCWA, to use the book as a starting point to address the team's issues.

In search of a solution that would meet CCWA's needs, Heinzerling connected with a coaching and consulting company, which was also a Five Behaviors Authorized Partner. This led her to *The Five Behaviors™*, the unique team programme based on the Lencioni teamwork fable. This assessment-based program helps teams discover how to effectively bring their talents together through the model of Trust, Conflict, Commitment, Accountability, and Results.

Heinzerling attended local *Five Behaviors™* showcase events where she explored the programme and experienced sample team activities. She discovered the success that other organisations had with the programme and wanted to bring this solution to CCWA. With guidance from the Authorized Partner, Heinzerling earned *Five Behaviors Facilitator Accreditation* and delivered a series of Five Behaviors workshops to the CCWA team.



Clayton County Water Authority Leadership Team

THE BASIS FOR TEAMWORK

The team began with Trust, the first behavior of the model and the foundation of all cohesive teams. In order to develop trust, team members must be willing to be completely vulnerable with each other. This doesn't happen overnight, but it only takes one person to break the ice and set an example for the rest of the team to follow.

For the CCWA team, their general manager was the catalyst for vulnerability. "I realised that I had to be more open and share with the team. This helps the team feel like they can be open and honest, too," said Thomas.

The Five Behaviors™ programme is paired with a personality inventory that helps teams improve communication and relationships in the workplace. Team members gain insight about their own personality style, as well as the styles of their colleagues. As a team, they see how personality contributes to team

development.

"We understand how each style acts and how we can best respond and work effectively together. Now, people are more open and willing to share their opinions," said Thomas.

PERMISSION TO HAVE CONFLICT

"I always thought you shouldn't have conflict on a team. I would always try to come to the rescue and calm things down. People got used to that," said Thomas. "I learned that I needed to let go. It was uncomfortable at first, but the more I do it, the better we get."

The Five Behaviors builds upon Trust to address the second behaviour: Conflict. The model helps teams discover the benefits of engaging in conflict as a healthy debate about ideas, minimising politics, and solving problems quickly. By addressing healthy conflict, teams have interesting, productive meetings, where they gain everyone's ideas on critical topics.

Permission to work through conflict empowers teams to resolve issues on their own, without getting their manager involved. "I learned I had to stop trying to squelch conflict during team meetings. I had to stop feeling like I needed to protect team members," said Thomas. "There has been a significant change in the team since I changed my behaviour. People began to open up."

The team's insights on Conflict moved them

to Commitment, the third behaviour of the model. Teams gain clarity around decisions and get aligned, even if not everyone initially agrees.

“Before, people would have feelings about certain topics, but no one would speak up,” said Suzanne Brown, Public Information Officer. “When we left the room, there would

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– Mike Thomas, CCWA General Manager

be chatter about it. Now, sometimes we go off on a tangent when discussing ideas, but sometimes we have to do that in order to get to where we need to be.”

As they put these behaviours into practice, they saw their team culture start to shift. “We really began to take ownership of our work and focus on results as a team,” said Thomas. “We realised what an unproductive personality can do to a team. We don’t tolerate that like we used to.”

This realisation put them right at the heart of the fourth behaviour, Accountability. As team members, they have a shared responsibility to get things done right and hold each other accountable. Each person is responsible for making sure everyone meets

expectations and stays committed to the team’s goals.

MEASURING SUCCESS AND MAKING PROGRESS

Continuing through the model, the team arrived at the final behaviour: Results. They adopted the concept of Team One, being committed to the main team. Although they had direct reports, they were committed to each other on the leadership team and worked toward achieving collective goals. “We realise that although we may approach issues differently, we have the same goal,” said Brown.

After completing *The Five Behaviors™* programme, Heinzerling took the team through their annual Managers Retreat. She presented them with their *The Five Behaviors Progress Report*, a report that highlights the team’s accomplishments and areas for improvement.

At first, viewing this report was disappointing. The results didn’t reflect all of the hard work they had dedicated to the programme. Their *Progress Report* showed an improved high score in Results, but little change for the remaining four behaviours. The team realised that they were more honest in their responses for the *Progress Report* compared to their responses for the initial team assessment prior to the programme. Their *Progress Report* provided a more accurate picture of areas they needed to work on.

To reinforce *The Five Behaviors™* model, Heinzerling facilitated a group activity at the retreat. Each day, team members would give paper links to each other, identifying strengths and qualities that person contributed to the team. By the end of the retreat, they had one total chain, which was a reminder of their cohesiveness.

The Managers Retreat gave the team the motivation to improve and engage *The Five Behaviors* at full speed. They took actionable steps to hold each other accountable and stay committed to the process. They instilled a fee of \$1 per minute for being late to meetings. During meetings, they utilised the Five Finger Consensus, a method that guarantees each person has the opportunity to weigh-in on a decision. People indicate their level of support for a decision by holding up between one and five fingers (five fingers = strongly agree, one finger = strongly disagree). This helps move the decision forward or allows for more discussion if needed.

The team also established quarterly lunch outings to strengthen their individual relationships. “These lunches are to talk about family and things in your personal life. It strengthens the baseline of trust and friendship,” said Brown.

As they implemented these changes, the concept of Team One became more clear. It was much easier and fun to achieve collective

success, rather than push personal agendas. They celebrated their second *Progress Report*, which showed high scores in two behaviours and improvement across the board. They were extremely proud and determined to continue building upon their success.

KEEPING MOMENTUM

The CCWA team continues to hold Team One as a priority. The team has set the standard for teamwork across the organisation and influenced the supervisory team of the Distribution and Conveyance Department to start their own *Five Behaviors* journey.

The organisation has experienced much success since the leadership team’s *Five Behaviors* experience. CCWA was one of the 61 utilities in U.S., Canada, and Denmark that was recognized as a “Utility of the Future – Today” by the partnership of water sector organisations including: the National Association of Clean Water Agencies, the Water Environment Federation, the Water Environment and Reuse Foundation, and the WateReuse Association. This recognition honors CCWA’s exceptional performance.

The leadership team holds annual retreats and continues to explore new ways to reinforce the *Five Behaviors* model. “It’s not six weeks and you’re done,” said Thomas. “It’s a journey and you’ve got to stay at it. If it’s not reinforced, it’s going to be short lived.”