

leadership instalments

Aversion To Conflict

By Dan Gaynor

EFFECTIVE LEADERS BUILD HIGH PERFORMING AND SATISFYING teams one person, one situation at a time. They use the triumphs and setbacks of each person's performance to provide feedback that helps people understand their roles more clearly and perform them more effectively. One person, one situation at a time, they continually strengthen their teams through feedback. This is why developing great feedback habits should be a priority for every member of the leadership team - a theme I continue to revisit.

For many leaders there is an obstacle they must overcome to achieve feedback breakthroughs, it is their aversion to conflict. You see, feedback challenges both followers and leaders. Most followers want more of it. Their relationship with you is important and they want to know how you see their work, but they also fear it. Most leaders know they should provide more feedback than they currently do, but they are a little nervous about it, particularly when they should talk to someone about something that has gone badly. Leaders caught in this dilemma will avoid much of the most important feedback. The people and teams they lead will never reach their potential. Most real growth entails some discomfort, on both sides of the leader / follower relationship. Providing corrective feedback that is constructive sensitive and specific is an essential leadership practice.

So how do we overcome this conflict issue? I think it helps to imagine a scale if you will, with your aversion to conflict on one side and your frustration with the problem performance on the other (let's say someone who comes in late two or three days a week.) You know you should correct this, but he is only a little late and the conversation could be a little uncomfortable for you both. Your aversion to conflict outweighs your frustration with the performance, so you avoid the feedback. You know what happens... the problem continues and your frustration builds until it finally overcomes your aversion to conflict, now you step in. By this point, most of us react too emotionally and the feedback we provide is much less measured and constructive than it should be.

And the employee who knows he has been late, wonders why you avoided talking about it. Your trepidation becomes evident and you weaken your authority as a leader.

So the key to overcoming conflict is changing the balance. Embrace constructive conflict as a vital part of your work. Learn to get comfortable with it as an important team building tool. Take

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your aversion to conflict down by understanding it, and you'll be much more likely to say something as soon as a problem appears, then you'll realize the benefits of early intervention:

- You'll strengthen your authority as a leader.
 - You'll be less emotional and so more measured and constructive in your response.
 - You won't let problems become habitual, so you will have more successful corrections and more successful team members.
- Because you don't let people form habits that lead to problems, you protect them and the team.

If this is you, if you are among the many leaders who would prefer to avoid conflict, take heart. Like anything else you can and will become more comfortable with practice. Understanding the dynamic balance between your aversion to conflict and your frustration with performance will help you get there. Change the balance. Make a disciplined effort to engage in these corrective feedback discussions, and you will take an important step in your development as a leader.

Discussion questions:

1. What is the most recent problem you have avoided discussing?
2. How has it affected the team and the individual?
3. Decide today, that you are going to prepare your thoughts and then discuss and resolve this problem.

For more on strong feedback skills call about a 1/2 day workshop or check out our e-book entitled, "High Performance Feedback."

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