# Managing Conflicts in Organizations

## By Becca Linden and Russ Linden

When you think of conflict, what comes to mind?

Most people have a negative response, and that's very understandable. But what if we re-frame the question: How do you react to the phrase "diverse views"? That tends to elicit a much more positive response, especially when people in an organization are trying to solve a problem, or chart a new course, or develop an innovative service.

So, our first point about conflict is this: there are many times when we should embrace conflict, if that means people are bringing different viewpoints to a given issue. Most highly effective organizations have cultures that reward diverse and creative thinking. Indeed, the opposite of such thinking can produce "groupthink," where people go along with one view without truly examining it. And that can be disastrous.

Given that diverse views can promote creative thinking, conflict can certainly become very negative: personalities can collide in nasty ways, people can dig in their heels and stop listening,   people with huge egos can  dominate, differences can become personalized. How do we manage the potential downsides of conflict?

Here are a few tips:

**Develop a few organizational norms or values, and include one that relates to conflict**. Some of our favorites include:

- We'll disagree, agreeably.
- Ask "what's the problem," not "who's the problem?"
- We value diverse views, and unity of action.

**When in a conflict, adopt an attitude of curiosity.** This can be difficult, but it's very powerful. Rather than each party focusing on the virtues of their own position, pause and ask the other to help you understand where they're coming from. The goal is to understand, not necessarily agree. In the wonderful book *Difficult Conversations*, the authors note that the first step when engaging in conflict is for each person to tell his or her story - their version of what happened. The other person's job is to listen and ask questions for clarification. A colleague of ours puts it this way: "Curiosity before criticism."

**Place constant emphasis on the organization's overriding goals.** One way to reduce internal organizational feuds and enhance performance is to continually remind people why they're there. Whether the mission is to reduce poverty, educate kids, sell a product or service, or save souls, effective leaders communicate larger purpose, why it matters, and how each unit contributes to that purpose. Doing so helps provide perspective, making it more likely that people will focus on what truly matters.

When we view conflict as an opportunity to gain new and diverse views, conflict can become essential to an organization's vibrancy.

On this coming 9Adar: Jewish Day of Constructive Conflict, explore ways to turn destructive conflict into constructive diversity.

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