

# Tools *for* LEARNING SCHOOLS

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## Build a culture that nurtures productive conflict

By Anthony Armstrong

*"If you have learned how to disagree without being disagreeable, then you have discovered the secret of getting along – whether it be business, family relations, or life itself."*

— Bernard Meltzer

When it comes to resolving conflict within teams, much of the advice you read is about the conversations that take place in groups. Attentive and deliberate communication is key when working through difficult conversations. However, educators set the stage for productive conflict by creating the right culture, well before any of those conversations take place.

For Liane Davey, vice president in Leadership Solutions at Knightsbridge and author of *You First: Inspire Your Team to Grow Up, Get Along, and Get Stuff Done* (2013), how we resolve conflict determines much more than how productive a team can be. "How educators choose to embrace, or not embrace, conflict sets a huge example for what we teach our children, so we are predetermining our future and whether or not we'll be a culture that is trapped by passive aggressive behavior or if we will benefit from productive conflict."



Productive conflict focuses on resolving tensions around an issue, happens in a safe place, and allows all parties to make healthy progress on an issue, said Davey. Part of using conflict as a tool for progress is to acknowledge the importance of it for learning. "Learning comes from mistakes and dead ends," explains Davey. "Imagine watching toddlers who are learning to walk. They learn to walk by trying things that don't work – they hang on to coffee tables, reach out to see if they can make it to the sofa – so their brains may learn that it was too far and next time to get closer." A team that is afraid to make mistakes, said Davey, doesn't learn quickly and members are afraid to contribute ideas.

Kenneth Williams, co-author of *Authentic Alignment in a PLC: Moving from Compliance to Commitment* (in press) and chief visionary officer for education consultancy Unfold the Soul, said that most of his work in teaching people to manage conflict is in showing them how to embrace conflict

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as a critical part of the learning process. “There’s an old saying I modified that I like to tell my teams. ‘If four of you agree on everything all of the time, it makes three of you irrelevant.’ I try to get them to understand that they have to introduce productive conflict into the learning equation to get the best out of each other.”

Understanding the value of conflict and how it contributes to a team’s progress is key to fulfilling responsibilities to those being served, said Williams, whereas avoiding conflict can shortchange students. “One of the things I emphasize for good, productive conflict is a willingness to engage,” explained Williams. “Many times we’ll see ‘cordial hypocrisy’ within a group, where everyone is nodding their head yes when they don’t actually agree. When this happens, kids lose out on our expertise and advocacy because the teams want to avoid conflict and did not get important ideas to surface.”

Creating an environment that nurtures productive conflict, Williams said, means creating accountability and a safe environment within which to exercise that accountability. Williams shares three ingredients critical to creating this type of safe environment – a shared purpose, norms to guide the work towards that purpose, and protocols for when those norms are violated.

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#### **SHARED PURPOSE**

“Everything we do emanates from our ‘why,’ our deeper purpose for existence,” said Williams. “If there is a belief that the kids will do better if the team

works together, productive conflict has a healthy place to grow and breathe and thrive. The ‘why’ drives everything and gives us something that is at stake. It compels us to engage in the productive conflict we need.”

A shared purpose, said Williams, helps move a team from a culture of compliance to a culture of commitment. “The goal is to move teams from meeting because the principal said so or because of district mandates to meeting because the team wouldn’t think of moving forward without consulting their colleagues and without being challenged by them.”

#### **NORMS**

Once they are clear on their shared purpose, stakeholders can align their goals to support that purpose and create norms to guide the work towards those goals, said Williams.

The alignment of norms towards a common goal takes away the personalization of many confrontations, Williams explained. “I don’t want team members to confront each other because people are not holding up their end of a bargain, but because their actions are misaligned and holding up the school’s agreed-upon fundamental purpose.”

However, said Williams, those norms will be ineffective if there are no accountability protocols to guide how the team handles a situation where someone violates a norm. “Part of developing norms is asking what it looks like when the team disagrees and holds each other accountable for pulling his or her weight.”

#### **ACCOUNTABILITY PROTOCOLS**

Typical norm creation exercises, said Williams, involve discussing what the norms would look like, listing norms on chart paper. “My next question for teams in this process is what happens when someone violates a norm? What happens when someone steps across the line? There is usually an awkward silence because typically people like to act like they didn’t see someone violate a norm or talk around a problem, pretending the problem person isn’t there.”

Tackling these types of considerations in advance provides a safe and predictable environment within which healthy conflict can occur, explained Williams. The question he asks teams to grapple with is: How are we going to hold each other accountable in a respectful and dignified manner?

“Some teams are wired to pick up on subtle cues from each other, where someone can sense that he or she has violated a norm and keep themselves in check,” said Williams. Other teams that Williams works with, though, use more explicit actions for when someone violates a norm. For example, some teams have an object that they push out into the middle of their table when someone violates a norm. The violator recognizes the cue and can correct and move on. Some teams simply knock on the table or verbally acknowledge that a norm has been violated and resolve it without skipping a beat. Another team saves the last five minutes of each meeting to do a quick self-assessment to see how they handle each norm during the meeting. Williams knows a team with a protocol that when someone consistently violates norms, the entire team visits the teammate and expresses their concerns, always ending their conversations with the question, “How can we support you?”

These types of accountability protocols depersonalize accountability, and help create consistency and predictability, said Williams, three important elements for creating a safe environment for accountability. “If I’m sitting in my classroom and the rest of my team shows up at my door, I may not be thrilled they are there, but since we all agreed to

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that protocol, I know why they are there and it is a predictable experience. Without the protocol in place, I would feel as if they ganged up on me or attacked me and we would all lose the underlying issue.”

**CLEAR COMMUNICATION**

Lydotta Taylor, president and CEO of The EdVenture Group, who has led extensive work in helping large organizations shift their cultures, emphasizes the importance of strong communication and leadership in creating cultures that facilitate productive conflicts. “There is a wide variety of challenges in education,” said Taylor, “but in most of the organizations EdVenture works with, many of the issues revolve around communication.”

Taylor shared an example of a time when she and her team of coaches were being introduced to the teachers in a school. “There was a tension in the room and we weren’t sure why. We discovered, through talking with the teachers, that one comment during the initial introduction started a big rift. Someone had called the coaches ‘experts’ and the teachers felt that the coaches were putting the teachers down. The person who had used the term expert during her presentation was floored. She hadn’t realized how that word would be interpreted, so she immediately apologized and the tension suddenly left the room.”

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To facilitate a communicative environment, EdVenture stresses the importance of including teacher and principal voice into team and school efforts. “We facilitate a process where they design a solution,” explained Taylor. “We don’t tell them what to do but help them think through their options and make suggestions. Giving groups of teachers and principals the ability to collaboratively solve their own problems is very powerful.”

**POSITIVE ATTITUDE**

Taylor stresses the importance of leadership in helping keep conflict communication positive. “The outlook and perspective of the leader has a major impact,” said Taylor. “Attitude is important. A negative attitude will trickle through many aspects of the organization.”

Davey agrees that positive communication is critical. “We don’t usually have a healthy conflict mindset,” said Davey. “Conflict is a positive force that spurs innovation, helps us bring together disparate ideas and diversity of thought, which creates innovation and helps mitigate risk.”

However, Davey cautions, positive communication is not the same as “nice” communication. “‘If you can’t say anything nice, don’t say anything at all’ is bad advice,” said

Davey. “While the intention may be noble, it is counter-productive to developing healthy and necessary conflict management skills. If you think about how it plays out, children get caught saying something that is not nice, but what they witness at home are their caretakers talking negatively when in the privacy of their cars or the kitchen table. So they learn that we are not supposed to say these things to a person’s face or when the other person can do something about it.”

Instead, said Davey, we should be socialized to use phrases that directly address the issue at hand and focus on moving forward. See “Quick tips for the conflict avoidant” on page 4 for specific techniques from Davey to turn conflict conversations into productive conversations.

**VALUED CONTRIBUTIONS**

“We have become expert-obsessed,” said Davey. “It’s a negative in our culture that someone has to be an expert or guru or have a PhD for their opinion to be of value. For example, some people may not be experts in e-learning, so their input may not be viewed as valuable. In reality, though, they are professional educators, may have children who have gone through e-learning, or maybe went through an e-learning course themselves. The stigma, though, means that they may be afraid to share their input because naysayers may immediately strike back with asking how many years of experience or training they have. A lot of people buy into that mentality and shut down.” In response to these types of naysayers, Davey reiterates that even though one is not an expert, he or she can still weigh in with a different perspective that may bring alternative ideas to light.

“Great teams are comfortable being uncomfortable,” said Davey. “Team leaders who step back to avoid conflict are not living up to their obligation in allowing a diversity of thought and channeling it into productivity.”

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**Anthony Armstrong (anthony.armstrong@learningforward.org) is Learning Forward’s associate director of publications.** ●