



Communication Cures For Managers Who Avoid Conflict At All Costs

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"Are you OK with this?"

"Anybody have a problem with that?"

"Somebody has probably already said this, but ..."

"Somebody tell me if I'm off-base here, but ..."

Silence.

If you're a leader asking such questions or making such comments, others often translate them to mean:

"You're concerned with your ability to facilitate a discussion when everyone is not in full agreement and where the culture values harmony above clear communication. People do not feel free to speak their mind, so you have to beg for input and protect everyone's ego if they give it."

If you're making those comments or asking those questions as an individual contributor – versus a leader – people translate it this way:

"You fear any conflict that might be caused by saying what you think. So you either couch your opinions indirectly in questions or feel the need to get permission before stating an opposing view."

"Can you hear me now?"

The now-famous Verizon commercial comes to mind: *"Can you hear me now? Can you hear me now? Can you hear me now?"*

The answer is ... "No!"

People often do not hear and understand indirect language. That is, they discount or ignore you.

I do not say this with condemnation. I say it with understanding because I'm a member of the conflict-avoidance secret society. I've been known to walk miles around a conflict to avoid getting caught in the cross-hairs.

Yet through the years, I've learned that I have to be willing to communicate directly to get an important point across. Not harshly, not arrogantly, not rudely. But directly – and positively, if possible.

Check into available cures – as a leader

- **Adopt a mindset that values** diverse opinions.
- **Show by words, body language, and actions** that you value those who speak up with opposing viewpoints.
- **Respond to dissenting viewpoints:** *“Thank you for letting us know where you stand on the issue. I wish more people did that.” “Thanks for bringing up that issue. It’s very appropriate that we keep that in mind.” “We should keep our eyes on that stat. It could become a real problem down the line. Thanks for pointing that out.” “Thanks for speaking up. I appreciate that.”*
- **Do a round-robin:** Pose an issue, a question, or a decision, and then poll individual group members for a one sentence or one-word response. *“How do you see this situation?”* Or: *“What’s your immediate ‘take’ on the decision before us?”*
- **Do a “temperature check”** like the nurse does when you check into the hospital. *“On a scale of 1 to 10, how’s your pain?”* Ask, *“On a scale of 1 to 10, how committed do you feel to this approach – 1 is not committed at all and 10 is gung-ho.”* After the “temperature check,” ask each person to elaborate on their number.
- **Comment often that those who speak up demonstrate concern** and commitment about the success of their projects, peers, and the organization. Look for ways to reinforce their active involvement.

Check into available cures – as an individual contributor

- **Adopt the mindset that expressing an opposing viewpoint fosters innovation,** creativity, and insight—not necessarily conflict. You will never be considered a “thought leader” (or even “thought follower,” for that matter) at your organization if you don't say what you think.
- **Practice the “Truth-in-Sharing” philosophy.** Maybe you've heard of the Truth-in-Lending Act that requires lenders to disclose full credit billing and credit-card practices to consumers. Similarly, forcing yourself to disclose the real truth about what you think regarding a situation up for discussion makes good sense—for solid long-term relationships, productivity, and profitability.
- **Learn to speak “on the record” rather than grumble in the hallway** or gripe in the cafeteria. There's no glory in being “against” everything—just for the sake of being negative or always pointing out the “downside.” But when you do see a fatal flaw that could take down the house, express that opinion at the right time, in the right place, to the right people.

In the end, you always need to remember: People who speak up move up.

This was originally published on Dianna Booher's blog at www.BooherResearch.com (<http://www.booherresearch.com/>).