



Esther Cameron

Growing leadership maturity

How conflict strengthens top teams

“... As they developed and became a performing team so the focus turned from the individuals to the issues being addressed; a new member of the team commented to the CEO that he had never been in a team that had argued so much and yet got on so well...” [1]

Most top teams see themselves as good at formulating strategy, setting priorities, making decisions and monitoring operations. However, it's much less common for a top team, or any leadership team, to see itself as a robust unit that can deal well with conflict within its ranks when times get tough. This is problematic for many leadership teams in today's organizations where complex, unknowable, and often politically sensitive issues need to be tackled.

Senior Leaders are often wary of conflict, and feel they lack the capacity and time to get people together to really talk. My sense is that often, deep down, they are longing to have good, honest conversations about the complex issues they are really facing. Instead, meetings tend towards being quite predictable and 'efficient', with the same two or three people dominating the conversation while others keep quiet. Unfortunately, the opposite of healthy conflict is not actually consensual agreement, but increasing apathy and disengagement, and a lurking discontent. This lack of mutual challenge and support doesn't just affect the members of the leadership team of course, but the whole organisation or function they are there to lead.

Many leaders feel ill-equipped to embark on a team development 'journey' despite the promise of improved effectiveness, particularly in top teams where there's a strong tendency to work independently because it's easier. One fear is that if everyone gets to have a say, and everything is connected up, the result will be an unnecessarily unwieldy team. Is it worth all the trouble and strife, they ask themselves? Have we really got the time and resources for this?

Yet conflict is a healthy part of the cycle of living and 'leaders of leaders' need to somehow master this territory if they want to capitalize on the collaborative power of their top team. It's also important that



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conflict is addressed in the right place, rather than projected onto other teams or stakeholders less able to push back. So it's important to bottom out disagreements and concerns to maintain a team's collective vitality and performance[2] and to ensure healthy relationships all round. A measure of independence will still be possible!

Lessons from community building and violence prevention work

In my recent studies with Jean-Claude and Arlene Audergon of CFOR (Force for Change), I've been learning about some extraordinary work that's being done in a very different setting. They have been supporting the re-building of communities in Croatia and Rwanda after the devastation and trauma of war. While this may seem worlds apart from the challenges of the board room, studying this work and its underpinning principles has taught me some really important lessons about what can actually be achieved by a group of human beings with the right support.

In situations where there has been such violence experienced between neighbours, it's hard to imagine how people can even begin to talk to each other about what's happened, let alone live in community together. The impact of this work has clearly been transformative and is described in terms of the process and its impact in [3]. You can find more articles and books explaining and documenting this work [on the CFOR website publications page](#) and [4]. There is also a short video clip, which is an extract from a one-hour documentary. This documentary tells the story of a 3-day meeting in Kigali, Rwanda of participants from three different districts, in which perpetrators and victims of violence meet. It is both astonishing and deeply affecting so please make sure you have some space to absorb it.

It might seem a bit banal to try to join the dots between this work and the work that's done in leadership teams. Yet it's clear that the atmosphere within leadership teams can make a huge difference to everything an organisation does; they have so much potential to do good things for so many! I believe that drawing these parallels is powerful and important in some way, and could even be transformative for some organisations. Maybe this is just a start. Much good work can be done in small ways if everyone begins to get a bit more aware of how conflict works, how deeply entrenched and hateful it can become,



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and what gifts it can bring us for the longer term if we just give it space. I'm certainly learning about this in my own life, if painfully slowly.

So here are **six core principles for working with conflict in groups** that all leaders are likely to find useful. These are drawn directly from my studies with CFOR and of a set body of work known as processwork [5]:

- a group needs to have a strong, common purpose before it will bear the pain and difficulty of truthfully facing the conflicts it has within it
- new conflicts will always arise and need to be explored. These are the seeds of growth for the team no matter how upsetting or disturbing, and carry new, helpful information (which may not be obvious at first)
- conflicts cannot be rushed through to resolution, and will simply recycle and resurface in other forms if not resolved in a healthy way; this can lead to aggression or violence in some cases
- there are 'hot spots' and 'cool spots' in conflict conversations; a skilled facilitator will slow the conversation down so that tension arising is explored ('hot spot') or a new group understanding is given space ('cool spot')
- often an issue or perspective does not just belong to one person but can be better expressed as a 'role' which others can add voice to, and may give rise to other roles. This type of exploration rapidly increases the group's awareness of the conflicts they need to deal with, and offers the possibility of creative resolution
- most of us are not very conscious of the way that power and privilege works in groups, as it is complex territory based at least partly on prevailing beliefs and values. This often hidden system tends to organise many of the conflicts that occur in groups, so increasing awareness of the way this works in a particular



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group is very helpful (and requires good quality facilitation!).

And here are **six pieces of advice specifically for Executive Teams** seeking to become more able to deal with conflict as a team. These arise from reflecting on my 25 years of experience working with Senior Leadership Teams to develop collaboration and teamwork:

- i) there needs to be some collective agreement that addressing conflict more directly is likely to support the team to be successful in achieving its core purpose
- ii) it's often helpful to start with a session where the team is invited to select the three or four topics that it would most like to discuss
- iii) as part of this initial session, the whole team can begin to become more aware of how it is behaving, what stage its development is at and where they would ideally like to be, given their core purpose
- iv) where business pressures are high and significant fears/anxieties exist, team members entering into such a process may need reassurance that they will not be negatively impacted for voicing an alternative perspective
- v) in almost all cases teams will need to commit to meeting for longer and make more, regular space for good quality discussion, even when tricky - and continue to self assess their own development as a team
- vi) over time, a set of dialogue groundrules is likely to be helpful to help everyone to continue to build skill in asking good questions, articulating a range of emotions and listening with empathy.

Conflict is experienced by almost everyone as a difficult disturbance, but it's a necessary part of the process of being alive. How we react to it and deal with it together as groups affects our capacity to grow, and doing this well will strengthen future, collective endeavours. The way an Executive Team deals with conflict is absolutely central to its ability to ride the waves of change and provide the creative forms of



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guidance and support their organisations need to succeed.

Esther Cameron supports CEOs, Senior Leaders and Top Teams who need to find a new way of working and communicating together. Please get in touch if you'd like me to come to speak to you, or members of your leadership team about what could be possible in your context.

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References

1. [Working with top management teams, Field \(2005\)](#)
2. [The Wisdom of Teams, Katzenbach \(2006\)](#)
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4. [Psychological Dynamics in Violent Conflict, Audergon \(2005\)](#)
5. [Conflict: Phases, Forums and Solutions, Mindell \(2017\)](#)