

Hello. It looks like you're using an ad blocker that may prevent our website from working properly. To receive the best experience possible, please make sure any blockers are switched off and refresh the page.

If you have any questions or need help you can email us

personnel, most of us try to avoid it like the plague. After all, wouldn't life be easier if we could just make decisions in a vacuum and not worry about what others thought?

**Jim Boomer** • Sep. 12, 2014



Conflict. Whether it is related to decisions about firm management, technology or personnel, most of us try to avoid it like the plague. After all, wouldn't life be easier if we could just make decisions in a vacuum and not worry about what others thought?

Yes, but more often than not, the quality of decisions made by a team of people with diverse backgrounds and perspectives is much higher. And diverse teams naturally

lead to conflict. However, conflict is not necessarily a bad thing. When managed

Hello. It looks like you're using an ad blocker that may prevent our website from working properly. To receive the best experience possible, please make sure any blockers are switched off and refresh the page.

If you have any questions or need help you can email us

complete a project or deploy resources.

- **Relationship conflict** – At the other end of the spectrum is conflict that deters progress. Relationship conflict is emotional in nature and focuses on interpersonal incompatibility. It typically results in tension, annoyance and animosity among team members. Differences in personal tastes, politics, values and personality are examples.

The most effective teams, and ultimately, the most effective decisions promote task conflict and work to diffuse relationship conflict.

## Common Pitfalls

Conflict management is not the same as conflict avoidance. When we avoid conflict altogether, we miss out on valuable information, experience and perspectives that improve the decision-making process. For example, a team might go with the first suggestion made just to avoid a confrontation. However, the suggestion may have been made simply because it had the least chance of resistance.

This results in a decision that no one on the team really supports. In this case, a little conflict—or at least discussion—would have been healthy and led to a better decision.

There are a number of decision-making processes that stifle healthy conflict or defer it in favor of the easier path. Here are some of the more common examples.

- **Majority Rules** – team members who sense they are in the minority will avoid offering a dissenting opinion to avoid feeling like an outsider or impedance to making a decision.
- **Defer to Those “In Charge”** – excessive deference to status characteristics such as seniority or the person with the loudest opinion does not lead to the best

decisions. There is a wealth of knowledge at all levels of the firm. Take advantage

Hello. It looks like you're using an ad blocker that may prevent our website from working properly. To receive the best experience possible, please make sure any blockers are switched off and refresh the page.

If you have any questions or need help you can email us

Some strategies include:

- **Utilize task forces and committees** comprised of members with diverse backgrounds and experiences. This will encourage differing opinions and perspectives as well as better decisions and outcomes for your firm.
- **Avoid starting a meeting with a vote.** You met for a reason. Discuss and debate the issues to explore all available information and attempt to resolve differences of opinion.
- **Do not compromise to avoid the conflict.** Recognize the value of debate, because it helps everyone explore more issues and, ultimately, make a better decision. Compromise is often necessary to move forward but it shouldn't be used until the discussion takes place.
- **Solicit minority opinion.** Make sure that people aren't keeping quiet simply to avoid the uncomfortable feeling of being in the minority. Some of the most valuable information will come from those who don't agree with the majority.
- **Focus on the behavior or issue and NOT the individual.** This is the most important – and most difficult – part of conflict management. When a debate becomes personal, the natural tendency is to become defensive. When people get defensive, a healthy conflict will quickly turn into an argument.

## Reaping the Benefits

Conflict is a natural part of working as a team. Too often, we avoid it in order to remain in our comfort zones. However, when managed properly, conflict can be extremely beneficial to decision-making. The first step to effective conflict management is to understand how to spot different types of conflict by listening carefully to team members and ensuring that you hear the messages they are attempting to convey.

Next, apply general rules to manage both task and relationship conflict. It is also

Hello. It looks like you're using an ad blocker that may prevent our website from working properly. To receive the best experience possible, please make sure any blockers are switched off and refresh the page.

If you have any questions or need help you can email us

Jim Dooner, CPA, CFP, is CEO & Shareholder of *Dooner Consulting, Inc.*

Firm Management • Technology

CPA Practice Advisor is registered with the National Association of State Boards of Accountancy (NASBA) as a sponsor of continuing professional education on the National Registry of CPE Sponsors.

© 2024 Firmworks, LLC. All rights reserved