



# Conflict is Good

November 2006 Volume 5 Issue 10

**W**hile unbridled anger and petty politics have no place in the boardroom or the office, conflict does – controlled conflict that is, for it allows an exchange of different ideas and the addressing of competing interests. Well, we all know that! But what if this author told you that conflict not only allows the inevitable integration of ideas and interests but also that it is a sign that things are very well indeed, in your company? Let's find out why.

### Managing

Change is the driver of us all. Change occurs the moment we first awake in the morning with a shift in weather, the need for your spouse to use the car today instead of you, the children's last-minute school assignment they forgot to mention the previous night or running out of toothpaste. What do we do about change? We find a solution: we pull out our raincoat, we take the bus, we hurriedly assist young Tommy with his homework adjusting with a 5-minute breakfast instead of 15 minutes and we might pull toothpaste out of our travel kit. That is, we manage the change; for managing is finding a solution to the problems caused by change.

### What do Managers Do?

In order to find solutions to problems caused by change we have to go through two initial rituals. We have to make a decision and then we have to do things to implement that decision. That is all that managers have on their plates – all day long. The difficulty lies in the fact that these activities, most of the time, involve other people too. A second observation we can make is that a good decision does not necessarily make for good implementation and good implementation does not always rest on good decision-making. The Iraq war was well implemented with a solid victory within a few weeks; however, most world powers argued that it was a poor decision to attack Iraq in the first place. I am sure that you and your team have sat around the conference table to arrive at well thought-out decisions that merited everybody's praise at the time only to find their subsequent implementation was not as expected; perhaps the task was never accomplished or its implementation might have been disastrous. That is because the drivers for each

of the two rituals (deciding and doing) are different, as explained below.

### Summary So Far

- Managing is finding solutions to problems which occur because of change
- Managing consists of two preliminary rituals: deciding and doing
- The drivers for the two rituals are different from each other

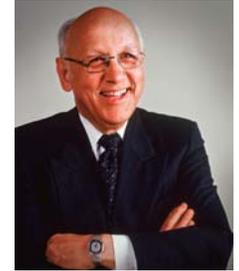
### What are the Drivers?

The limited space of this column allows the explanation of only one of these two ritual drivers. The quick answer to both is that the driver for deciding is PAVF and the driver for doing is OAK. We will dwell on OAK since many people find successful implementation (doing) more elusive than successful decision-making.

### PAVF, the Driver for Decision Making in a Nutshell

While PAVF is explained in detail in References<sup>1</sup>, the letters represent four basic human characteristics as first outlined by Hippocrates in 350 B.C. although he used different words than we do now relating them to the body fluids. We all have some of these but we tend to be strong in one or two of them and weak in the others. For example, P for Producer<sup>1</sup> describes a very active person who can't sit still; A for Analyzer<sup>1</sup> refers to an extremely thorough person engrossed happily in detail; V for Visionary<sup>1</sup> is a person who likes to improve situations or things, a person who is full of ideas and is usually creative; F for Friend<sup>1</sup> relates to a people-oriented

<sup>1</sup> References of Caswell, Adizes and Merrill are available on request.



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individual who is characterized by empathy and friendliness. Pause for a moment to think about people you know who seem to fit each of these characteristics.

Since P, A, V and F respectively correspond to what (P), how (A), why (V) and who (F), you might see that the complete PAVF combination is needed in decision-making since all those questions must be answered in decisions. In fact we can show<sup>1</sup> that an equal amount of all four is required to achieve balanced decisions. Hence PAVF becomes the driver of decision-making. Proper decisions (i.e. balanced decisions) fail to be made if all of PAVF are not present or are not adequately heard around the conference table. So much for a PAVF summary!

### Why Things Don't Get Done – Lack of OAK

Just as balanced decisions fail to result if all of PAVF are not represented, the doing or implementation doesn't get done if OAK is lacking. If you have OAK the task will get done. If you do not have OAK, it will not get done.

The acronym OAK stands for Oomph, Authority and Knowledge<sup>1</sup>. If you are about to implement any task you must have enough Oomph, enough Authority and enough Knowledge to cover the task.

### Authority

To use Authority as our example, imagine that your grandmother who is not very mobile, wants you to buy a new living room couch for her. The authority she gives you is that you will have \$500 to spend on a sofa. You visit your nearby furniture shop and find at least \$800 will have to be spent. At \$500 you do not have enough financial authority to do the job. After a discussion with her, she agrees to raise your authority to \$900. Now you have enough authority to do it with ease. That is, the authority exceeds the demands of the task and it can readily be implemented.

### Oomph

A two-person delivery team brings the sofa to your grandmother's apartment a few days later. When they see that the apartment is on the sixth level of the old building and that there is a twisting staircase ahead of them, they protest. They estimate that the 100-kilogram object will not get over some of the railings without a third person. They don't have enough Oomph to implement the delivery task. Oomph has to be increased to match or exceed the demands of the task. You volunteer to help; now the load is distributed at about 33 kilos (70 pounds) per person, still a tall order for six flights. Someone may strain a muscle or the couch may bash the walls during the ascent. The janitor of the building seeing the dilemma, and being fond of your grandmother, offers his assistance. Now, at a load of 25 kilos per person the Oomph is sufficient to meet or exceed

the task. It can get done.

### Knowledge

Because of the unusual twists and turns of the stairwell, its narrowing towards the end of the six flights creates an awkwardness. Neither you nor the delivery team knows how to navigate that last part. The knowledge is less than the task at hand. Fortunately the janitor knows how to raise the couch at the appropriate times and when to drop it back; he has the knowledge that matches the task at hand. The task can get done.

### Assembling OAK

Notice that each of Oomph, Authority and Knowledge must be in place i.e. all of OAK must exceed the demands of the task or it will not get done. Whether the task is dealing with a couch, pushing a Mack truck out of a snow bank or getting a new computer system installed in your office, you must define and assemble OAK for the task – OAK that matches or exceeds the task. It is the task itself that defines the OAK not some well-meaning problem-solving team. Such a team can easily lack the authority or the knowledge, etc. If you have OAK you will successfully implement the task. If not, watch out!

### Conflict

When you bring the different parties together that make up OAK you will find they have different interests that are often in conflict. In the above example, the delivery team has rules to abide by, such as not carrying furniture beyond two flights; the janitor has his interests in sticking to looking after the apartment maintenance; while your interests lie in an unfinished list of chores back home. The conflicts can be resolved amicably if all parties convert their divergent interests to a common one. In this case the common interest is the welfare of your sweet grandmother. A common interest has to be found for all implementations.

### Back to the Formula

The chain of events described above is almost a formula which runs as follows: change, problem, solution, (deciding<sup>2</sup> or) doing, OAK, conflict, common interests. Because the process follows that sequence, conflict is an inevitable consequence of change, which we have already stated is the driver of all. The more dynamic the company, the more that changes will occur within that company. Based on the chain of events above, the more changes that arise, it becomes axiomatic that more conflict must result. Therefore the sign of a dynamic company, starts with change and must end with conflict (but well-managed conflict). Thus increased conflict is a sign of a progressive company, ergo conflict is good. Now the challenge is to learn how to harness that conflict positively – the subject of a future paper.

W. E. Caswell

<sup>2</sup> Deciding is actually a parallel chain to Doing but is not covered in this paper.