Human conflict—as old as humanity itself—occurs frequently in the workplace in forms ranging from insults and bullying to harassment and threats and even to physical assaults.1 As leaders navigate past a global pandemic and through a dramatically altered workplace, they should anticipate even greater occasion for conflict.2 Indeed, according to a 2021 survey of 1,000 US remote workers, 80 percent have experienced workplace conflict, an even greater percentage of workers than prior to the pandemic.3

Conflict might occur due to real or perceived disparities in access to information, assignments, and promotions between those who work on site and those who work remotely, for example, or even over matters of masking and physical distance among workers who return to the office.4

Facing heightened challenges and opportunities posed by remote and hybrid work—and by employees’ greater demands for a worker-centric culture—leaders should place greater emphasis on building trust and relationships. To discourage destructive conflict without suppressing healthy debate, leaders should combine emotional intelligence, cultural competence, and sound communications with authentic and appreciative leadership styles.5

---

4 Sarah Morrison-Smith and Jaime Ruiz, Challenges and Barriers in Virtual Teams: A Literature Review, SN Applied Sciences (May 20, 2020); Alex Garrison, Reduce Potential Conflicts as Employees Return to the Workplace, Zurich, September 21, 2021.
Insights for What’s Ahead

- **Acknowledge and adapt to workplace change.** Employees now demand much greater flexibility and better treatment. With their feet to the fire, leaders must learn how to manage, inspire, and evaluate the performance of a distributed and newly empowered workforce. Leaders should consider how their style—including actions and inaction—contributes to the benefits of healthy relationships, trust, and constructive conflict.

- **Be appreciative.** Appreciative leaders focus on what’s going well—solutions over problems. They explore employees’ strengths and interests, then “fan and flame” them. They leverage the tenets of appreciative inquiry, a proven tool to validate and empower stakeholders, including remote and hybrid workers.

- **Be authentic.** Workers respond to leaders who show up authentically, as opposed to actors who merely take on the persona of a leader. Leader authenticity signals acceptance and belonging; it drives the trust and psychological safety necessary for healthy debate and strong relationships.

Employing Authentic and Appreciative Leadership for Healthy Disagreement

**Acknowledge and Adapt to Workplace Change**

Albert Einstein is purported to have said that “in the middle of difficulty lies opportunity.” Whatever its provenance, the quote could not be more apt for leaders today as they struggle with the demands of a dramatically different postpandemic workplace. Leaders’ ability to learn and adapt to the new realities of work will, in large part, determine whether their firms reap the benefits of a more flexible and potentially engaged workforce versus one mired in mistrust and conflict.

- **Conflict at work:** According to a groundbreaking study conducted in 2008, the average US employee spends almost three hours each week engaged in unhealthy conflict, amounting to more than $350 billion in lost productivity each year. That was almost 15 years ago, and it has been said that conflict is a growth industry.

Just a decade or so ago, for example, firms were not debating the extent to which employees should determine where, when, and even what work gets performed. Nor were leaders actively addressing incidents of microaggressions, learning employees’ preferred pronouns, wrestling with unconscious bias, or struggling to build an inclusive culture of belonging.

Today, managers must determine how to design a psychologically safe, equitable, and inclusive workplace for hybrid, virtual, and fully on-site workers. New questions around proximity and distance

---

biases, including unequal access to information and career advancement opportunities, present an environment ripe for mistrust and disagreement.8

This new reality arrived relatively suddenly, placing new burdens on largely unprepared leaders and managers.9 Yet opportunity and advantage abound for those who embrace the changes. For example, a growing body of research links better business outcomes to authentic practices around diversity, inclusion, and belonging.10 Centuries of philosophy and psychology—confirmed by recent neuroscience—demonstrate that fairness, autonomy, learning, collegiality, and purpose generate trust, empathy, and safety, while also motivating people to greater citizenship behaviors and more effort.11 Where leaders deliberately nurture the ingredients of DEI, trust, safety, and empathy, they can expect that teams will engage in constructive debate while avoiding groupthink and circumventing most negative conflict.12

Leaders who adopt a mix of two styles of modern leadership centered on authenticity and appreciation develop the mindset necessary to adapt to the new workplace and to leverage it for success.

Be Appreciative

Leaders are still expected to execute and operationalize strong deliverables for their firms while navigating the new workplace dynamics. “Good” conflict grounds itself in humility, psychological safety, and openness, and it expresses a broad range of emotions. Appreciative leaders create these conditions and permit healthy conflict by paying attention to the positive—to what’s going well. They take time every day to notice when teams and team members progress; they recognize and appreciate effort, and they celebrate success. They spend time with employees getting to know them. This aids in crafting tasks and learning that align with employees' strengths, interests, and career aspirations. Appreciative leaders build confidence and autonomy in their team members so they can rely on employees to solve problems.

In keeping with the central tenet of “appreciative inquiry,”13 appreciative leaders look for and amplify the positive. When they discover an employee’s strengths, they nurture those abilities.

❖ “Tracking means staying constantly aware of what you want more of and noticing it, even when it’s only in little amounts. Fanning means finding ways to amplify what you’ve found, turning a little flame into a roaring blaze,”

---

Again, appreciative leaders create conditions that build trust, strengthen relationships, and reduce negative conflict. Why is this so important? Consider the vast implications associated with some of the most egregious incidents of destructive conflict: sexual harassment, bullying, discrimination, and emotional abuse. These human capital issues affect multiple stakeholders and can create extensive collateral damage, placing them among the most expensive liability issues in the workplace today. Leaders must deal with the alleged victim and perpetrator, while also attending to the impact on observers, as well as the general implications for the broader workforce and external stakeholders.

Appreciative—and therefore, attentive—leaders are more likely to spot conflict early on, giving them time to address issues before they flare into major incidents that can cause reputational, legal, mental health, and broader workforce damages to the firm and its employees.

Be Authentic

Authentic leaders lead by example. They model, not merely preach, the firm’s values and desired behaviors. Authentic leadership is honest, deeply insightful and reflective, purposeful, and motivated by high ideals—all driven by self-knowledge and uncompromising standards. Leaders must be true to themselves. This is difficult to do until a leader truly knows himself. Indeed, true leadership can only begin when a leader looks deep into herself to see who she truly is, and then decides whether she really wants to be a leader.

When a leader shows up at work authentically, without pretense, and sure of her desire to coach and serve, employees notice. Trust increases. Those who report to authentic leaders receive implicit permission to explore and present their own truth, causing the virtuous cycle of trust and psychological safety to accelerate. In time, this translates into “radical candor,” which drives healthy debate and knowledge and idea-sharing, and also erects natural robust barriers to destructive conflict.

When unhealthy conflict does occur, the authentic and appreciative leader addresses it as soon as he becomes aware of it; he takes the attitude that the cause of the conflict matters less than resolving it and preserving trust and relationships. Except in extreme cases where one side is clearly at fault, authentic and appreciative leaders do not assign blame. They work with the parties to seek a consensus that respects everyone’s dignity. In these ways, negative conflict doesn’t spin out of control, linger, or destroy relationships.

* * * * *

14 Bushe, Appreciative Leadership.
15 Bushe, Appreciative Leadership.
As we continue to journey through the inevitable peaks and valleys associated with organizational and workplace change, leaders must pivot like never before. As is now clear, workers expect more from work; including greater autonomy, flexibility, psychological safety, transparency, and better leadership. Though negative conflict is inevitable, leaders who demonstrate authenticity, and who appreciate employees’ ideas and strengths, will more successfully navigate the evolving workplace than those who don’t. Transformational leaders who embrace authenticity and appreciation, and who acknowledge the symbiotic relationship between leadership and conflict, will adapt well to the new workforce realities. These leaders stand to secure advantages where others may experience pain.

Arthur Matthews  
Senior Fellow, Human Capital  
The Conference Board

Allan Schweyer  
Principal Researcher, Human Capital  
The Conference Board