



Harvard Business Review

REPRINT H00UJ2
PUBLISHED ON HBR.ORG
JUNE 06, 2014

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by Amy Jen Su

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Most of us have some resistance to conflict. Instead of addressing issues directly, we try to be “nice” and end up spending an inordinate amount of time talking to ourselves or others — complaining, feeling frustrated, ruminating on something that already happened, or anticipating something that might happen. These conversations usually sound something like this:

“My colleague interrupted me again. We’re supposed to be leading this effort together and this is his way of showing he’s the boss. He just makes me look bad in front of the team. I’ve been replaying it in my mind over and over again.”

“Someone has to tell my direct report that his bad attitude is affecting the rest of the team, but I’m dreading it. I’ve been thinking about it all day and haven’t been able to get anything done.”

“I know what they’re going to say — that we can’t have more resources due to budget constraints. I’ll probably just give up on this.”

Sound familiar? These are just three recent examples that I heard in coaching sessions with clients.

Here’s the trouble: These efforts to be “nice” can have pretty significant costs. You create relationships that are neither authentic nor constructive. Your health and self-esteem may suffer and you signal that you’re a victim. And your organization loses out as you make compromises with the loudest person in the room, lose the diversity of thinking that’s critical for innovation, or stop producing the best solutions.

Below are five tips I’ve offered clients when they find themselves avoiding conflict:

Recognize that being nice is an outdated strategy. At some point in your life or career, you probably got burned by conflict, and felt shamed or criticized. When that happens, we often decide to be accommodating rather than ever feeling that way again. We choose safety, peace, and harmony over speaking up.

When I ask clients why they don't want to have difficult conversations, it usually comes down to fear of experiencing those emotions again. Many have an "a-ha" moment when they realize they're no longer that younger version of themselves; they're now a more seasoned, experienced person with new skills and know-how. As one client recently put it, "I'm still behaving as if I'm that second-year associate who got shouted-down by the senior partner for pushing back. But I'm now the general counsel of this organization."

Focus on the business needs. When you avoid conflict, you're actually putting the focus squarely on yourself. In all three cases above, the clients felt backed into a corner, concerned about how others might perceive them. But it's not about you.

When I ask clients, "What would the CEO, customers, or shareholders of your organization say about this situation, and what does the business need?" they're suddenly much more objective and clear:

"The business needs me and my peer to be a united front."

"This direct report has a lot of potential and if I could coach him to use a more positive style, he could make a great contribution."

"We need to discuss the vision of what we're trying to achieve and the resources it will take to make that possible."

Take the focus off you and your fear and concentrate on what the business needs.

Speak objectively and make requests. Use observations, not labels. For example, in the case of the direct report, he's likely to be defensive if you say, "I need to talk to you about how negatively you come off in staff meetings." Instead, talk about what you observed: "I noticed in the last two staff meetings that when the COO got to the topic of the change initiatives, your body language changed and you reacted quite strongly. I'd love to discuss how you could share your concerns in the most productive way possible."

Include a request for the behavior that would support the shared business goal. In the case of the interrupting colleague, you might say, "In the last team meeting, I noticed that we were interacting with each other in a way that may be throwing the team off. To keep the team on track, it's important that we appear as a united front. Can we determine what role we'll play in the meetings in advance or agree on some non-verbal signals when it's time to pass the baton?"

Keep a calm demeanor. People who shy away from conflict often assume that it has to look aggressive, overbearing, or disrespectful. It doesn't. You can — and should — be yourself and remain approachable, non-judgmental, and calm in these situations by being clear, focusing on the business needs, and making a request to ensure the business goal is achieved.

Start with baby steps. Like any muscle you build, it takes practice and repetition before you can ratchet up your abilities. Start with easier situations first and address the conflict retrospectively (it can be hard to do it in the moment at first). But institute a statute of limitations whereby you cannot ruminate, fume, or carry on unproductively beyond 48 hours. During that 48 hours, focus on being more conscious and self-aware. Ask yourself: What are my triggers? What caused my anxiety and why does this feel personal? What does the business need from me in this situation? What request am I not making? Then, take action.

Gradually, each of these new experiences will help you reframe conflict from something you dread, to something that — when properly embraced — can help move the business forward.

Amy Jen Su is a co-founder and managing partner of [Paravis Partners](#), a premier executive coaching and leadership development firm. For the past two decades, she has coached CEOs, executives, and rising stars in organizations. She is the author of the HBR Press book *The Leader You Want to Be: Five Essential Principles for Bringing Out Your Best Self—Every Day*, and co-author of *Own the Room: Discover Your Signature Voice to Master Your Leadership Presence* with Muriel Maignan Wilkins.
