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## **ARTICLE** **CONFLICT**

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*by Amy Jen Su and Muriel Maignan Wilkins*

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# Three Ways to Capitalize on Creative Tension

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Clashing management styles do not always lead to management clashes. Recently, we’ve noticed a trend with clients asking for help in coaching and consulting around issues of differing styles — issues that we’ve had to sort out ourselves as we’ve grown our business.

Neither of us can quite remember how we came together — we just know our business relationship hatched over great food and not-so-great wine at the corner table of a hole-in-the-wall Thai restaurant in D.C. We had been section mates at Harvard Business School almost 15 years previous and, back then, would have never guessed we’d be business partners and co-founders of an executive coaching and leadership development firm.

We’re complete opposites; yin-yang, hard-soft, decisive-reflective. Amy is more stereotypically yin — reflective, conceptual, a practitioner at heart, a “farmer” in how she approaches business development. Muriel, more stereotypically yang — action oriented, pragmatic, an entrepreneur at heart, a “hunter” in how she seeks and shares opportunities. On the Myers Briggs, Muriel tests [INTJ](#) and Amy tests [ENFJ](#). Whatever the personality test or assessment, our styles are usually inverse to each other.

On our good days, it works well.

On our bad days, we admittedly have driven each other crazy, blamed the other for something not working out, or critically justified and advocated our own approach.

Have we each taken things personally? Absolutely. Have we let ego get in the way? Been there, done that.

Yet somehow, we can honestly say that it's been in our differences — and ensuing creative tension — that we've found success.

There are three lessons we've learned along the way:

**1. Manage yourself and your expectations.** Put two people together who are stylistically different and it will undoubtedly lead to conflict at some point. Why? Because they have different expectations of how things should be done and of each other.

*Muriel is quick to make a decision and take action. Amy likes to consider multiple perspectives and play out the impact.* More than not, [we hit an impasse](#) where we have a different expectation around how we'll make a decision and how long it will take.

Believe us, we have our stress reactions in those moments. *Amy feels a knot in her stomach, gets quiet, goes rigid. Muriel feels herself getting impatient and tense.*

We've learned to keep the discourse productive by catching our “on auto-pilot” reactions, pausing (not easy, but the critical step!), and then stepping up to offer something more constructive.

*“How much time do you need to let me know your position on this?” “Here's where I am at but would like us to consider these two possible issues.”*

We try to keep three things in mind: self-awareness, self-management, and effective communication.

**2. Look past the surface.** David Harrison, Professor of Organizational Behavior and Human Resources Management at Penn State, and his colleagues have studied [deep-level diversity and surface-level similarities in teams](#). Their research found that although surface-level similarities bring people together quickly, it is deep-level similarities that produce greater impact on team performance.

Unpeel the onion and you'll see shared values around the quality of work we deliver, a desire to make a difference in the work we do, and a deep belief in the integrity of one's word and action.

You'll often hear one of us say, “I know that I could put Amy/Muriel in front of any client and would never worry about it.”

And, while it's easy to characterize or stereotype, one of our other business partners described it best, "Muriel has a direct style yet there is a softness and vulnerability;" "Amy has a softer style yet there is an edge of strength and conviction."

The old adage, you can't judge a book by its cover rings true.

**3. Push for innovation and benefit.** Instead of focusing on disparities, channel your creative differences toward a shared goal. Ironically, the ebb and flow of our relationship and working through its dynamic is what helps us coach leaders to maintain their authenticity and distinction while effectively connecting to stakeholders.

Muriel's concrete, "here's what you need to do" approach combined with Amy's conceptual, "here's what this means" approach has led to some of our best work.

In the years since that first Thai dinner, we've both matured and become confident about our differences. We respect them for the benefits they've brought to our shared business, clients, and colleagues.

How have personality differences worked for or against you? How have you successfully managed these relationships?

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**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.

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