

# Some Conflict Management Magic

## GETTING THE CARDS ON THE TABLE

*It is my opinion that true conflict in a working group is actually pretty rare. More often than not, what seems to be conflict is actually a lack of information and the conflict is mostly imagined. This incident, which took place at the Navy's Human Resource Management Center in San Diego, illustrates my point.*

A group of about a dozen senior naval officers (commanders and captains) from various departments in a very large Navy program had been assembled to prepare a joint position statement about future directions and emphases of the program. They were meeting at the Human Resource Management Center where I was stationed.

The group had been allotted three days to prepare the paper and, by the middle of day two, had made absolutely no progress. They acknowledged their lack of progress to each other and asked the commanding officer of my center to make available to them one of the organization development (OD) consultants on staff at the center, someone who could help them resolve what they saw as conflict rooted in hidden agendas. The task fell to me.

I went to the large meeting room where the group was assembled and engaged them in a discussion of purposes. My initial aim was to take the group back to the reason for their being there. After hearing them out, I asserted it was my guess they had each been charged by the head of their respective departments to make certain their piece of the program, or its agenda, or its priority, or its budget or some such issue, survived the meeting. They were all charged with protecting something and they were to bring it back safely – or else.

I was guessing, of course, but it was a good guess. Nods and laughter confirmed my hunch. At this point, I suggested it would be a good idea if the group members wrote down what they had been charged with “bringing home,” as it were – just to be clear.

When all were finished, I went to an easel sheet and indicated I would like all present to share their charges and I was going to write them down in plain view. A couple of the officers protested, saying they did not know they were going to be asked to expose their charges to view. Other officers quickly squelched the dissent, saying if they didn't get all the cards out on the table, they would never be able to resolve the logjam and move forward, in which case they would all be in very deep trouble.

The items, about two dozen in all, were quickly listed. I stepped back, reviewed the list, and announced to the group, “I don't see a single item up there that conflicts with any other, do you?” The group members agreed and one of them, a captain, said, “Thanks, Chief, I think we can take it from here.”

The entire intervention took less than an hour. The report was ready by the end of the day and the group went home a day ahead of schedule.

Shortly after the group left, my commanding officer called me into his office and said, “Nick, what kind of magic did you work up there?”

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“No magic, Skipper,” I said, “I just got ‘em to put their cards on the table.”

### Reflections

Getting people to put their cards on the table is an essential step in resolving what appears to be conflict, especially of the win-lose variety and, as I said at the outset, I am very much of the opinion that true conflict is rare; most of the time it owes to a lack of information.

### Afterword

A few years later, as a consultant working in the private sector, I encountered a similar situation working with a VP and his department heads at what used to be New York Telephone. Cards were being held close to the vest, so to speak and, once again, when they were put on the table the logjam was broken.