

Reducing Conflict 60 Remote Conflict

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD



Remote conflict can be very difficult to resolve. In this article I will share a true story of how two teams of people were in deep conflict. It is amazing how quickly it was resolved.

A new type of disk drive

In the late 1980s, I was the program manager for a new type of floppy disk drive. It had more than double the capacity of existing drives. There were two groups involved in the project. The equipment team was in Rochester, NY, and the media group was in San Diego.

Late in the development, a problem arose that stopped us in our tracks. It was some type of compatibility issue. The media team in San Diego was convinced it was a hardware problem. Naturally, the hardware team in Rochester believed the problem was with the media.

We versus they thinking

For three weeks we struggled to pinpoint the problem and get the program back on track. We had almost daily phone calls and numerous email messages with data. There was a kind of language that was polarizing the two groups. I kept hearing “we versus they” language when people tried to describe their experiments. They would say “we wanted to try a different head, but they thought it was a waste of time.”

No viable solution

Regardless of the continuing effort from each group, we were making no progress toward a resolution. I finally had enough. On an afternoon phone call, I made an announcement. We would get a small group of the equipment team on an airplane that afternoon. They would arrive at the media plant in the morning.

Sugar cookies

When the teams got face to face in the same room the atmosphere changed. I witnessed the brainstorming, and within an hour a solution popped out like a batch of sugar cookies. They were able to communicate in a different way and all the defensive language stopped. Looking back on it, both teams agreed that we should have been able to see the solution. It just did not occur until people were face to face.

Conclusion

Remote and hybrid work is common these days, and it is likely to be so forever. Listen for “we versus they” language and take steps to get people physically together if there is an impasse.

Look for the language in virtual conversations and also in email. Once you get good at spotting polarized thinking, you can intervene earlier and save a lot of grief.

Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD, is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and author in the areas of leadership and trust. He is the author of *The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals*, *Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online*, and *Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind*. Bob has many years as a senior executive with a Fortune 500 Company and with non-profit organizations. For more information, or to bring Bob in to speak at your next event, **contact him at www.Leadergrow.com, bwhipple@leadergrow.com or 585.392.7763**

