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Resolving Tough Conflicts — One Competency at a Time

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The ability to resolve conflict is a core competency for leaders in all types of organizations. It's no wonder there's lots of advice out there on the topic.

The good news is that much of it is excellent. The bad news is that most of it pertains to "routine" conflict — conflict that arises every day and is best addressed by using interest-based, or principled, negotiation that produces win-win solutions.

But what about conflicts that reappear despite our best efforts to resolve them? For example, what about the family business in which a father has threatened to sell the company rather than pass it on to his children? Or a newly merged company suffering from a long-standing conflict between two of its highest-profile members?

For all its successes, principled negotiation has its limitations. A new framework called CIVIC aims to enable organizations to effectively deal with persistent conflicts. CIVIC is an acronym for the five core competencies individuals need to do this: complexity, interconnectedness, values, imagination and courage.

Complexity
According to researcher Peter T. Coleman, many long-standing conflicts involve multiple parties, issues and relationships. The first step in solving long-term conflicts is to recognize this complexity. The second step is learning how to anticipate the potentially complex consequences of our own and others' actions.

For example, in the case of the family business in which a father wants to sell the business rather than pass it down to his children, it is important for all parties to ask themselves a set of questions about the potential consequences of their actions before taking a next step. Some important questions include: What are the possible unintended consequences of my behavior down the road for others? For myself? For the company? For future generations of my family and the company's leadership? When we take this

long-range view, we may gain a new perspective that can help us prevent conflict from escalating.

Interconnectedness

Conflicts often are made up of interwoven interests and needs between the parties. For example, consider a company in which the sales leaders and the R&D individuals can't see eye to eye. If they didn't need one another, they could simply walk away. But sales would have nothing to sell if R&D didn't create the products, and R&D would have no way of putting new products into customers' hands without a sales force.

In the heat of a conflict, it can be easy to lose sight of the ways in which we depend on one another. A first step out of the conflict is for the parties to simply appreciate the fact that they are interconnected. It helps to map out our relationships and put on the map at least one new person, place or event that we haven't previously considered to be part of the situation. We should also put on the map at least one positive contribution that each person, place or event brings to the situation. Doing so can help us shift our perspective.

Values

If conflicts persist over a long period of time, the parties are invariably getting something out of it. If they weren't, they would have ended the conflict long ago.

An important question to ask ourselves is: What benefits do I personally receive from staying in this conflict? The answer may uncover important — but hidden or taboo — values that each party holds. For example, we may benefit from staying in a conflict if we get to feel that we are right and the others are wrong or if we get sympathy or attention from others. Sometimes staying stuck in a conflict simply allows us to avoid having to deal with it or make a difficult decision. These are all legitimate values or needs that we have, but bringing them to light allows us to find ways to attain them through other means.

Imagination

This core competency has two parts. The first is the ability to envision a better future. This requires that we take a step back and ask ourselves: What would this situation look like in its ideal state? Keeping in mind complexity and interconnectedness, what is the ideal state not just with regard to one other party, but for all involved? Map this out.

The second part of this competency refers to the ability to communicate this vision. If you are a leader in the conflict, you may need to communicate your vision both to your own team and to the other parties. Ask others to contribute to your vision of a compelling future.

Courage

At the end of the day, we may have the greatest ideas on how to get things back on track to produce superior results. But if we don't do things differently than before, we'll stay stuck in the same patterns. We must consciously choose to act differently, one small step at a time. This takes courage. It may take being unconventional or pushing past our comfort zones. We can study the actions of our favorite courageous leaders — real and imaginary — and choose to live by their example.

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