



Management and Performance Associates – August 2012

Mars and Conflict on Earth

Seen as a major step for mankind, the third and most technically challenging rover, Curiosity, landed successfully on Mars in the early hours of August 6, 2012. Part of the success can be credited to Rob Manning, the chief engineer who “mock-sabotaged” the whole enterprise in many different ways in order to ensure that his team was prepared to handle any possible disaster.

Why did he do that?

Most of us are wired and trained to see a problem from one perspective, often missing and avoiding crucial information that disproves our theory. Please click on the following link <http://blog.ted.com/2012/08/06/5-rules-for-productive-conflict/> to see a Ted Blog on the subject of productive conflict. Also, if you have an additional 13 minutes to spare, please be sure to watch the referenced thought provoking Ted Talk on the subject of daring to disagree http://www.ted.com/talks/margaret_heffernan_dare_to_disagree.html

For an additional angle to the subject, let’s go to ancient Greek philosophy. This is what Plato (427 BC - 347 BC) had to say:
 “You are young, my son, and, as the years go by, time will change and even reverse many of your present opinions. Refrain therefore awhile from setting yourself up as a judge of the highest matters.”

Why is it so hard for us to refrain from judging? Why is “different from the status quo” considered awkward? A friend of ours, who lives in the UK, constantly reminds foreigners (as they complain that the British drive on the *wrong* side of the road) that the opposite of right is left, not wrong.

Driving on the left is a fact. Driving on the *wrong* side of the road is an opinion. If such a small difference bothers us, imagine when we hear others’ opinions about politics, religion, values and

principles? It requires an open mindset and a lot of skill to process these differences.

First, let’s remember that not everybody is troubled by differences. Some people have a genuine curiosity, an appetite for the unknown. It could be something as “simple” as traveling to a foreign country and trying their national dishes, or a little more complicated such as listening to a staff member verbalize a contrary opinion. Just as our mothers used to say when we refused to eat something different: “How do you know you don’t like it if you haven’t tasted it?” similarly you should consider the staff member’s idea before killing it.

Let’s explore the two sides of this coin.

1) **Dare to disagree**

Change your mindset and have the courage to offer a differing point of view. As Mark Twain once said: “Sane and intelligent human beings are like all other human beings, and carefully and cautiously and diligently conceal their private real opinions from the world and give out fictitious ones in their stead for general consumption.”

Don’t let your team or organization go in the wrong direction because it is not politically correct to disagree with the boss. If you disagree with the decision being made (and you have solid arguments), say so. No organization today can afford not to explore different points of view.

2) **It is all about listening actively, which is much more than not interrupting.**

It involves the following:

- A) **Avoid cloning and group thinking.** Surround yourself with people who act, think and operate differently from you. How can we be creative if everybody agrees with everything and there is no questioning? It is not easy to deal with



differences, but you will reach a much more productive outcome if you develop the skills to do so.

B) Take a holistic approach.

When everybody agrees with the proposal, question it, challenge it, ask “what if” questions. When everybody is against it, bring the advantages to the table. When all information is logical, bring up the emotional impact. When the group is stuck, think outside the box. Be sure to facilitate the discussion and ensure that the process is followed. For further reading please consult Edward de Bono’s “Six Thinking Hats.”

C) Don’t pretend to listen.

Give the other party your full attention. Turn off all of your electronic devices. Give them eye contact. Focus on what you are hearing. Listen, don’t judge. As asserted by the late Stephen Covey “Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply.”

D) Read between the lines.

Don’t limit yourself to what they are saying. Focus on *how* they are saying it. On what is *not* being said. Many cultural groups will not voice their disagreement directly and in an assertive manner. Listen to the nuances of the situation. *Read* the environment. When things are unclear or your opponent is using an indirect speech pattern, ask open ended questions to clarify the issue. One of the most powerful lines in influencing is “tell me more....”

E) Don’t assume.

Even if you think you “get it,” paraphrase what you heard. It is also critical, especially in a conflict situation, to state what you understand are the emotions being communicated.

F) Respect the other party; do not impose your point of view.

Look for a solution that addresses the needs and interests of both parties.

Would the Rover have landed on Mars without Rob Manning’s strategy? The answer to this question is pure speculation, but what we know, for sure, is that the risks would be exponentially higher. Contrary to popular belief, avoiding conflict is dangerous and risky. Conflict is needed, as different ideas bring creativity and innovation, which are critical for any organization in today’s environment.

See you next time. We welcome your feedback.

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