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**Nice Managers Embrace Conflict, Too**

by Ron Ashkenas and Lisa Bodell  |   2:00 PM October 16, 2013

Most people want to be liked: It’s one of the fundamental tenets of human behavior. Because of that motivation, many of us have an unconscious desire to avoid conflict. We prefer to “get along,” “not make waves,” and “act as a team player.” We all want to be known as a great person to work with.

The only problem with this mindset is that creative ideas and better ways of getting things done often stem from [constructive conflict](http://blogs.hbr.org/2013/07/how-criticism-creates-innovati/). Organizations need it to advance. And even in the day-to-day, workplace conflict is still inevitable because organizations are full of bright, ambitious people with different points of view, controversial ideas, and disparate values. There’s no way that we can get along with everyone all the time.

Finding the right balance between the need to deal with conflict and the instinct to avoid it is one of the toughest challenges that most managers face. While most realize that allowing unbridled conflict can create a toxic atmosphere with low morale and high turnover, they often miss the fact that not enough conflict can be just as damaging. When people hesitate to speak up about poor practices or processes that don’t make sense, it creates a significant amount of unnecessary complexity and fosters a passive acceptance of the status quo. That’s why “stop being so nice” is one of the seven strategies for organizational simplification that we highlighted in a [previous post](http://blogs.hbr.org/ashkenas/2013/05/seven-strategies-for-simplifyi.html).

Of course, overcoming the natural and often unconscious tendency to damp down conflict is tough to do – but if you’re willing to try, these four best practices can help:

**Quote *The Godfather*.** In order to foster more constructive conflict and feedback, remind your team and your colleagues about [Don Corleone’s admonition](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0068646/quotes) that “it’s not personal, it’s business.” Doing this will reinforce the notion that we can disagree about ideas and strategies, but still respect and like each other — something that is often forgotten in the heat of battle. With this principle in mind, encourage team members to ask probing questions and challenge assumptions. Eventually asking, “Have you thought about this?” should feel like a productive conversation, rather than a personal attack.

**Create challenge events.** Rather than leave it to chance, schedule time with your team to question norms and change the way things are done. Make it clear to them that processes are expected to evolve over time (even the ones you created) and that it’s OK to push back on them. Doing this will create a “safe space” where they can assess whether [routine tasks](http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10000872396390444860104577559560237866648.html) are worth the effort, and modify them if necessary. It also allows people who might hesitate to raise issues by themselves feel more comfortable doing so in a group.

**Recognize employees who question the status quo.** When employees take the risk of creating a productive disruption, give them positive reinforcement. If someone pushes back or raises an uncomfortable question in a meeting, back them up rather than shut them down. If possible, use it as a teachable moment to encourage others to do the same.

**Set ground rules for conflict.**Since everyone struggles with conflict to some degree, develop a few standards for how your team can manage it constructively. For example in one company’s review sessions, participants need to begin with at least two positive comments before anyone is allowed to throw in a criticism. Although it feels a little awkward at times, this practice forces everyone to take a more balanced view of other people’s work, which reduces the tension and allows for more productive discussions. In another firm, every meeting ends with five minutes of what’s called a “plus/delta” critique of the meeting – with quick comments about what was good about it and what should be changed the next time. Again, this more structured practice makes it easy and acceptable to openly and constructively criticize.

In the short-term, it’s almost always easier to avoid conflict and come across as being a “nice” manager. But more often than not, being a little less nice might be the best thing for your people, your organization, and you.

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**Time to Hang Up on Voice Mail**

by Michael Schrage  |   9:00 AM September 30, 2013

Who writes with fountain pens? When did you last prepare transparencies or exchange faxes?  RIM? RIP. Sic transit gloria mundi. When once-innovative technologies descend—decay?—into anachronism, it’s time to put them out of your misery. Disconnect enterprise voice mail.  Now.  Be honest—you don’t really want to leave a 90-second message after the beep and you certainly don’t care to listen to one. You’ve got faster, better and friendlier [ways to communicate](http://blogs.gartner.com/jack-santos/2012/04/13/the-beginning-of-the-end-of-voicemail/).

You’re already using them. There’s not a Fortune 2000 enterprise worldwide that wouldn’t enjoy a healthy productivity jolt by ridding itself of this tool that’s degenerated into handicap. Who do you know in your organization uses it well?  By contrast, which colleagues leave voicemails secure in the knowledge that you will never—ever—retrieve them? (Surely you would never do such an ambiguously unethical thing….)

That the technology is in decline is no secret. In 2012, [Vonage reported](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2198226/The-end-voice-mail-Huge-decline-number-people-bothering-listen-somebody-leaves-message.html) its year-over-year voicemail volumes dropped 8%. More revealing, the number of people bothering to retrieve those messages plummeted 14%. More and more personal and corporate voicemail boxes now warn callers that their messages are rarely retrieved and that they’re better off sending emails or texts. Consequently, informal individual policies have metastasized into de facto institutional practice. Is that wise?

The truly productive have effectively abandoned voicemail, preferring to visually track who’s called them on their mobiles.  Irritated office workers, by contrast, despair that their desk phones can’t display who’s called and when. They’d be far better off if office calls were forwarded to their devices with the relevant Caller IDs attached. Yes, unified communications protocols and technologies were supposed to address these gaps but they’re taking an inordinately long time to do so as other messaging alternatives improve. [Google Voice](http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/technology/2009/05/you_have_no_new_messagesever.html) and other audio-to-text transcription services could also obviate the aural inefficiencies but, frankly, few organizations have bothered to make that investment.

The result is the worst of both worlds: A legacy system drag on organizational productivity and individual confusion around the technology’s role and relevance in getting work done. That’s wasteful. What’s worse, it signals enterprise laziness and complacency.  What’s the big deal? If people want to call, they’ll call; if the want to text, they’ll text; if they want to email, they’ll email. More choice is used as an excuse for not thinking through how individuals and teams should be productively communicating.

Focus and ingenuity come as much from useful constraints as usable options. Back when I did use voice mail, the most important constraint I implemented was limiting messages to no more than 30 seconds. I had friends and colleagues who were leaving one, two and even 4 minute messages. This wasn’t good when you’re calling in between flights. Now, of course, the only voicemails I listen to are from people I don’t know. (Talk about inefficient!)

Which raises a provocative point:  For most organizations, the only people who matter going into voicemail are customers and clients! How smart and customer-centric is that?! Not very. Voicemail’s technical flaws and shortcomings reveal something very important about the customer engagement future. Nobody wants to be put in voicemail anymore and it’s quite likely that customers and clients aren’t listening to your voicemail messages either.

But for everyone inside the firewall, it’s long past time to end the futile and time-wasting games of telephone tag.  A communications medium that was once essential has become as clunky and irrelevant as Microsoft DOS and carbon paper. You want to have better, faster and more responsive communications inside your organization and save some money besides? Have an online conversation about online communications—and unplug your voicemail system.   If you’ve got a problem with that, don’t bother to comment. But do feel free to call me and leave a message.

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**How to Listen When Your Communication Styles Don’t Match**

by Mark Goulston  |   1:00 PM October 9, 2013

Why do people who consider themselves good communicators often fail to actually hear each other? Often it’s due to a mismatch of styles: To someone who prefers to vent, someone who prefers to explain seems patronizing; explainers experience venters as volatile.

This is why so many of us see our conversational counterparts as lecturing, belaboring, talking down to us, or even shaming us (if we are venters and they are explainers) or as invasive, out of control, and overly emotional (if we’re an explainer and they’re a venter).

Facing this kind of mismatch, what do you think the chances are for either person actually listening with an open mind?

My answer is… very low.

It is tempting to say “zero,” but since it’s not possible (or even desirable) to work only with people who match your communication style, you need to develop the skill to try to [listen around their communication style](http://www.amazon.com/Just-Listen-Discover-Getting-Absolutely/dp/0814414036).

Listening around that style, however, can be incredibly effortful.  When someone is either venting/screaming or explaining/belaboring it triggers a part of your middle emotional brain called the amygdala, which desperately wants to hijack your attentive listening and instead react reflexively with whatever your hardwired reactions are.  And resisting that[amygdala hijack](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amygdala_hijack) is exhausting.

**What do to with a venter/screamer**

[If your conversational counterpart is a venter/screamer](http://blogs.hbr.org/2013/05/how-to-listen-when-someone-is/), your hardwired survival coping skill might be to tell them to calm down (which will only make them more upset), to shut down and get silent (which will only make them yell longer, because they’ll think you’re not listening), or to try to point out how irrational venting is (which, as noted above, they will perceive as patronizing and belaboring).

Instead, say to yourself, “Okay, here comes another temper tantrum.  Just let them blow.  Try not to take it between the eyes and imagine you’re looking into the calm eye of a hurricane and the storm is going over your shoulder.”

To do this, focus on their left eye. The left eye is connected to the right brain — the emotional brain.  Let them finish. Then say, “I can see you’re really frustrated. To make sure I don’t add to that,  and to make sure I don’t miss something, what was the most important thing I need to do in the long term, what’s the critical thing I need to do in the short term, and what do I need to get done ASAP?” Reframing the conversation this way, after they’ve finished venting, will make sure that your “explainer” self knows what to do – instead of ignoring the venting as another random outburst from “Conan the Barbarian” or “the Wicked Witch of the West.” Chances are, they do have something important they’re trying to tell you – even though they’re not communicating it very well.

After they respond, say to them, “What you just said is way too important for me to have misunderstood a word, so I’m going to say it back to you to make sure I am on the same page with you. Here’s what I heard.” Then repeat exactly, word for word, what they said to you.  After you finish, say to them, “Did I get that right and if not, what did I miss?” Forcing them to listen to what you said they said, “because it was important,” will slow them down, will help you stay centered and in control, and will earn you their and your own respect.

**What to do with an explainer/belaborer**

If your conversational counterpart is an explainer, your hardwired survival coping skill might be to say to yourself,  “Here they go again, make sure you smile politely even if you want to pull your hair out. Try not to let your impatience and annoyance show.” The problem with this is that even though they may be oblivious to others as they go on and on, at some level they may be aware of your underlying impatience and… that might actually make them talk longer. Yikes.

Realize that the reason they explain and belabor things is probably because their experience is that people don’t pay attention to what they say.  They don’t realize that while that may be true of some truly distracted people, for others, the reason they don’t pay attention is that the speaker is belaboring something that the listener already heard — and doesn’t want to hear over and over again.  Another possibility is that these explainers may not be feeling listened to somewhere else in their life (by their spouse, kids, parents, or boss) and is now  relieved to have you as a captive audience.

When the explainer goes into his explanation/lecture/filibuster, say to yourself, “Okay, this is going to take a while.”  Put a mental bookmark in whatever you were working on. Then look them in their left eye with a look that says, “Okay, take your time, I’m fully listening.” Instead of feeling frustrated and reacting by become impatient and fidgety, remind yourself, “They need to do this. I can be patient.”

Then when they finish then apply a similar response to the venter/screamer with the following minor edit:

“I can see that you *really had a lot that you had to say*. To make sure I don’t miss something, what was the most important thing I need to do in the long term, what’s the critical thing I need to do in the short term, and what do I need to get done ASAP?” ”

After they respond to that, say to them, “What you just said is way too important for me to have misunderstood a word, so I’m going to say it back to you to make sure I am on the same page with you. Here’s what I heard.” Then repeat exactly, word for word, what they said to you.  After you finish, say to them, “Did I get that right, and if not, what did I miss?”

Your amygdala is probably saying to you and to me, “I don’t want to do either of those things. [These people are obnoxious and unreasonable](http://smartblogs.com/leadership/2013/08/29/whos-holding-you-hostage-mastering-difficult-conversations-part-1-conversations-with-difficult-people/). Why should I kowtow to them?”

Here are several reasons:

1. **They aren’t likely to change.** These are deeply ingrained personality traits.
2. **Being more open and inviting them to talk rather than closed and resistant will lessen their need to act this way.**  Listening patiently hath charm to soothe the savage (or boring) beast.
3. **You will feel more self-respect and self-esteem.** The above approaches will enable you to remain cool, calm, collected, centered *and* communicative in situation that formerly frustrated you and made you react poorly.

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**What We've Learned About Communicating with Employees in an Emergency**

by Sarah Green  |   4:59 PM April 22, 2013

On Friday, with the Boston metro area on lockdown, many folks stuck at home were running an experiment in how much information can be consumed at once. I maxed out with a laptop streaming video coverage, iPhone full of tweets, TV blaring footage, and radio providing analysis — all simultaneously. (I’d have been using the iPad too, but was limited by having only two hands, dangit.) While we do live in an era of great access to information, this proliferation of devices only made it that much more obvious that the river of information had slowed to a frustrating drip.

But the inability to communicate clearly and quickly didn’t just affect how much the public or the media knew. Employers, too, ran into this challenge as they tried to notify employees that they don’t need to come in to the office — and in fact, that they *should* stay home, as offices were closed. At 5:45 Friday morning, Harvard Business Publishing sent a mass email telling employees to stay home. Staples sent a message to their staff at 7 am. One PR firm emailed its employees at 6 am, while an environmental nonprofit emailed at 8.

But not all the messages got through. A simple technical miscue can mean that not all employee email addresses make it on to the “everyone” email list. For others, the timing can be wrong. For instance, our early morning security guard found herself in the office before the message had gone out. Because our offices were at the heart of the locked-down zone (you probably saw them on television) she was then stuck here all day, while law enforcement used our parking lot as a staging area. Similarly, at Staples, Mark Cautela, a PR manager, mentioned that a couple of employees who had left home before receiving their 7 am message had ended up at their Harvard Square store, and ultimately decided it was safer to stay there than try to get back home. While the store remained closed, the employees hunkered down inside.

And as with the rest of the week, miscommunications and tempers both flared. In the absence of the information we want, we’re overreacting to what little information we have. Cautela mentioned that they’ve been actively quashing online reports that Staples told employees to report for work despite the lockdown, saying those resulted from misunderstandings. A person who works in health care tweeted angrily that her employer was going to charge her vacation time for staying home on Friday. As it turned out, a supervisor later called her to assure her that that was not the case — while that would have been their usual policy, given the severity of the situation they’d decided to make an exception.

Of course, not every employer did tell employees to stay home. On Friday, I heard reports through social media that some employees were either explicitly told to report for work, or felt pressured to do so. Then there was the too-perfect story that police had [allowed](http://www.buzzfeed.com/jessicamisener/dunkin-donuts-in-boston-are-still-open-during-lockdown)Dunkin Donuts to remain open to serve first responders.

But some companies did get it right, safely shutting down their businesses for the day, communicating that shutdown effectively to their staff, and pre-emptively answering any concerns about lost wages or benefits.

Making sure employees know what to do in a fast-breaking emergency isn’t as easy as just sending a text or an email. It takes [preparation](http://blogs.hbr.org/cs/2013/04/when_were_hungriest_for_leadership.html) as well as rapid execution. One Cambridge-based company, HubSpot, talked to me about how they coordinated their response, with people in IT, security, and HR all working together to first identify employees in the Watertown area who might be in harm’s way, and then reaching out to those people “to make sure they had heard the news and didn’t plan to go outside,” said Katie Burke, from the company. They phoned, texted, and as a last resort, emailed them individually. Then, says Burke, “Our Chief Security Officer notified all employees early [Friday] morning that the office would be closed so people wouldn’t drive or try to train into work and get stranded.” Finally, they made sure everyone knew there’d be no penalty for staying home, and encouraged them to reach out if they needed help.

Another company for whom this situation struck very close to home was [athenahealth](http://www.athenahealth.com/our-company/about-us/medical-practice-management.php), which offers cloud-based services to health care providers. Carolyn Reckman is VP of athenaEnvironment, the function that covers everything to do with the firm’s physical environment, from facilities to security. “As a HIPAA-regulated organization, we have a heightened sense of responsibility for business continuity and crisis management,” she told me. Their crisis plan was enviable.

Every employee, when they first join the company, is handed a wallet card with Reckman’s phone number and other emergency contact numbers. At 4:30 in the morning on Friday, Reckman was awoken by a Watertown-based employee who’d called the number on that card to tell her that he had heard gunshots outside his home, and was now following the unfolding events on the news and listening to a police scanner. It sounded, he said, like this might go on for a while. Reckman jumped out of bed and activated their emergency notification system. The first alert went out to the firm’s crisis-management team, a group of about 15 or 20 people from around the company. Closing for the day “was a no-brainer,” Reckman said. So within another few minutes, they’d activated the automated emergency contact system that goes out to all employees — reaching their home phones, cell phones, work phones, work email accounts, and personal email accounts. They got the message out by 5:30 am.

“I was asleep until 6 a.m.,” said Amanda Guisbond, who works in the communications department. “I woke up and had a voicemail on my cell phone telling me the offices were closed, and I also had an email in my gmail account, which was good because I wouldn’t have been checking work email right away.”

Looking at the successes and the mistakes here, some simple best practices emerge:

**First, email isn’t the best way to get in touch with people in an emergency.** This seemed especially true in companies whose employees were hourly workers who generally don’t have employer-provided smartphones. It was also especially true for anyone in the immediately affected areas of Cambridge or Watertown, where bullets and home-made bombs were flying and time was essential. SMS text messages were a quicker way to push information out to people, although this approach was less common among private employers and more common at universities. For instance, both MIT and Emerson College used text messages to push alerts out to members of their communities. Emerson’s alert went out at 5:10 Friday morning. And MIT’s first alert went out at 11:01 pm Thursday night, shortly after a member of their campus police was found shot. As Reckman told me, “Really, I think the only way to do it is to hit people’s personal cell phones.”

**Second, make sure it’s a system multiple people can activate, from any location.** At athenahealth, any employee can call a senior manager and alert them to an emergency, because of the wallet card they’ve been asked to carry. Moreover, there are 15 or 20 people on the crisis management team, any one of whom can activate the alert system. It shouldn’t be a system that relies on people being able to access their work email, or that you can only log into from inside the office.

**Third, when the crisis is over, ask what you could have done better.** For instance, when Reckman first initiated the emergency system — the one that went to the 15 people on the crisis team — it said “this is a test.” Obviously, it wasn’t a test, and that’s something she said they plan to figure out when they debrief on the incident this week.

But finally, **the companies that got this right realized it wasn’t only a technological challenge, but a management challenge.**Not only did they communicate in human, empathetic terms, but they also addressed practical concerns up-front, such as assuring their employees that they wouldn’t lose time off or pay. Unfortunately, the number of companies that did this seems small. Those who didn’t not only created publicity problems for themselves when employees began venting on social media, but also generated anxiety in employees who wondered if they were going to take a financial hit for the time spent obeying the lockdown. Companies who have refused to pay their hourly workers or have forced salaried workers to take a vacation day are no doubt creating sour memories in their staff, perhaps saving a few dollars in the short-term, but fostering bitter feelings in the long-term. The policy at athenahealth is again admirable: in the event of an emergency office closing, everyone still gets paid. And Nordstrom confirmed over Twitter, after the fact, that all employees who had been scheduled for Friday shifts at the Boston store will still be getting paid.

The companies that got this right anticipated the questions and concerns that all of their workers would have — no matter what mode of communication they’re most likely to use and no matter where they sit on the salary scale. It’s understandable, perhaps, that an executive who does the daily email “prayer” — check it first thing when you wake up, and last thing before you go to sleep — might assume that was the best way to reach *all*workers. It’s understandable that in the heat of the moment, giving reassurance on pay and benefits might just not have occurred to those executives, either. They may be worried about their own safety, or just, as highly paid professionals, unlikely to worry about a day’s pay or a day’s vacation here or there. But that’s why it’s so essential to have a plan for these sorts of emergencies ahead of time: to cover the fact that, in the moment, [you probably won’t be thinking clearly](http://blogs.hbr.org/hbr/hbreditors/2012/12/facing_the_unimaginable_and_le.html).

If you wait until the bomber is on the loose, or the hurricane is barreling down the coast, or the need to evacuate your building has become only too clear, you have waited too long.