

THE AGILE PRACTITIONER | Tom Bellinson

Conflict is Scary

To hear the human resources experts tell it, conflict is something of which to be wary. As a result, we are programmed to avoid conflict. Conflict creates emotional stress and can lead, if one is not careful, to other HR violations. It is in this context that I sometimes find myself facing internal conflict.

Call it a debate. Call it an argument. Call it a heated discussion. Whatever you call it, it's what happens when people of different viewpoints share and defend them.

There may be a common belief that teams who are always arguing are dysfunctional. While this may well be the case, it is not a foregone conclusion. When trust and respect are in place, heated debates are not synonymous with personal attacks.

I am reminded of a team I was on years ago that argued incessantly. No issue, however trivial, went unexplored. It was easily one of the most productive teams I've ever been part of. The innovations we created together regularly surprised even us! After a day of heated debate, we often went to the bar and hung out together.

I recently found myself in a situation on one of my teams in which my teammates felt I had taken the debate past the point of value. They may have been right. I suppose my actions are colored by my experience. I know that sometimes, it is right at the point when people become exasperated that new ideas are generated. Most of us have a desire to find resolution. The intensity of an emotional debate can spark that creativity that can be missing when teams just get along.

Of course just having conflict doesn't mean things will work out well. Further, different levels of conflict require different levels of trust that may not be there. Whole books have been written discussing patterns for building trust and having effective communication. For the purposes of keeping the post under 200 pages, I won't go into all of them here. Maybe a short story will suffice.

I found myself on a relatively new team with me being the newest member. As is typical, everyone expected the scrum master to hit the ground running, so after a few weeks I began looking for ways that I could help the team improve. One member of the team (we'll call him George) was known to have an explosive personality when provoked. I had witnessed him "starting to blow" a few times and was able to back down by yielding and going into a more passive mode of communication.

On one particular occasion, I felt that we were stuck in some legacy practices that were not serving us well. I started by questioning why we do things that way. As I probed deeper, it became obvious that I was exposing some flaws in the approach and George started to get increasingly agitated. I was torn because I knew I didn't have enough trust to go where we were about to go, but I also could see that the rest of the team was on board with it. Sometimes, you need to take a bullet for the team.

So, I pushed forward and moments later, George “blew up.” After a brief, but spectacular rant, he stormed from the room. The rest of the team pressed forward with the discussion and concluded that a change made sense. I could have left it at that, but I saw an opportunity to increase trust with George.

I went to George after he cooled off and the first thing I did was apologize for the way I communicated. I said that I had been manipulative. Notice, I did not apologize for my position. I also said that I respected his experience and that he may have understandings that would make my suggestion for change undesirable. There were risks and I acknowledged them. I ended by asking him if we would give the change a try, knowing we could always abandon it if things didn't improve. He agreed.

I am currently reading [Team Genius: The New Science of High-Performing Organizations](#) by Rich Karlgaard and Michael S. Malone. As an agile practitioner, it is important for me to continually push the boundaries of what teams can accomplish, so I look for sources of inspiration and understanding. I come to any book about teamwork with skepticism, because so many of them are based on pop psychology. This book surprised me with the depth of both neuroscience and social research that went into it.

A strong case is made for teams that find the magic balance of discord brought by diversity of membership and the creative energy that flows from it. Evidence shows that by mixing divergent cultural and mental orientations, ideas that are generated in the group get systematically challenged. This process of challenging ideas forces them to undergo development that often leads to better outcomes than if the original idea had gone unchallenged.

Of course, challenging ideas can easily devolve into personal attacks and other destructive behavior that is counterproductive. That's why good leadership is essential to allow team conflicts to feed off of the energy created. Good leaders help teams build trust. Research and my own experience shows that trust is an essential ingredient to managing diversity.

As the individuals on a team learn to trust the motivations of other members, they can take comfort in the knowledge that disagreements are not personal. This shifts the focus of attention away from egos and towards the topical source of the conflict. Whereas one member might be more focused on safety and traditional approaches, another member prefers the bleeding edge. These two will almost always provide a counterweight to one another. One person advocating for innovation and the other ensuring that risks are understood and managed if not mitigated.

These compromises are challenging when people with good intentions bring passion, knowledge and experience to the discussion. Each is confident in their own assessment of the approach. This confidence translates to a strong defence of one's viewpoint. Since there will likely be at least one member of the team who will attempt to avoid conflict at all cost, it is critical that leaders balance the tension created by the divergent viewpoints with the desire to quickly reach consensus.

Consensus reached through capitulation for the sake of ending conflict is not the same as that which is reached through the rigors of evaluating all available factors and striking a balance between creativity, safety, and execution. Having team members advocating for each of these viewpoints will almost guarantee conflict, but it does not have to be an emotional roller coaster. Like the team I mentioned in the opening, when trust is strong, heated debates become a quest for the best outcome and nothing more.

As a scrum master, I believe that part of my role is to encourage risk-taking and change in the face of uncertainty. It's scary stuff. Teams without a diversity of membership can fall into the group-think trap and become complacent. Complacency and consensus rarely lead to As a scrum master, I believe that part of my role is to encourage risk-taking and change in the face of

uncertainty. It's scary stuff. Teams without a diversity of membership can fall into the group-think trap and become complacent. Complacency and consensus rarely lead to greatness. Continuous improvement usually requires some friction.