

Peace Is Overrated:

Balancing Tension to Maximize Results

By Rob Zell

Introduction

In this, the era of the knowledge worker, few people act on their own. Work gets done by committee, by consensus and by cooperation. The fact is that none of us have all the information necessary to get the work done. We rely on others for input, feedback, and perspective that very few of us can manage on our own. We meet, huddle, “sync up” and touch base. Often, these sessions become unproductive because of the [many barriers that arise](#).

Without fail, conflicts and tensions will arise in some or all of your meetings. We should avoid the meeting in which conflicts never occur. Conflict, when harnessed and directed can be very productive. With a little bit of people knowledge and a set of communication skills, we can navigate the tension that arises in these meetings and turn that conflict into fuel for creativity and productivity.

Know Your People

There are plenty of tools that can be used to assess personality; you probably have completed several in your career. The challenge with some of these is being able to use the information to rapidly assess others and meet them on their own terms. One model you can use is the [Social Styles Model](#). Using the model you can look for behaviors that indicate assertiveness and responsiveness.

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Assertiveness

On the assertiveness scale you can look for behaviors that are bold and outgoing which would indicate “tell” assertiveness. People who are more reserved, who lean back and ask more questions tend to be “ask” assertive.

Responsiveness

The responsiveness scale measures the degree to which an individual is “controlled” or “reactive” in their responses.

The combination of these behaviors can be used to predict a person’s overarching behavior.

- Tell Assertive / Control Responsive – Driving Style, these people need results
- Tell Assertive / React Responsive – Expressive Style, these people need personal approval
- Ask Assertive / Control Responsive – Analytical Style, these people need to be right
- Ask Assertive / React Responsive – Amiable Style, these people need to get along

This is great information to have, but more important is knowing that each type of person has a need, and when that need isn’t met they resort to a defense behavior to create space and relieve tension. In order to bring the person back to the table, you have to appeal to the person’s need and respond in kind. While a small amount of tension [can actually help people understand one another and engages teams into focusing on the goal at hand](#), too much tension closes a person off to feedback and collaboration.

Communication Is Key

Fortunately you can use some simple communication strategies to help you overcome the resistance that others may use to reduce their stress. In order to be successful, you need to be aware of your own style so you can manage your own tension and demonstrate flexibility. You should also practice some situational awareness and try to identify the types of people you are dealing with.

When the tension in the meeting starts to rise, it’s a good idea to identify it. Acknowledging it makes it less intimidating and assures everyone that it is appropriate for the context. Look for opportunities to meet the needs of people in the room by paraphrasing concerns and using specific, non-personal language to steer the conversation on track.

For example, the Driver in the room will likely become impatient with brainstorming and hearing everyone's ideas. This person is primarily interested in results. Setting a clear time limit on the brainstorming and being clear about outcomes helps the Driver feel like something is getting accomplished. The following statement helps the Driver see the end of the road.

"Julie, I think we're getting some good ideas on the table. I can see you are ready to get started on an action plan. Let's evaluate each idea now and then we can start working on the plan."

The Expressives in the room feel better because you have acknowledged their ideas. The meeting can now progress in a productive fashion. Notice that the statement was not a personal attack. It is simply a statement reflecting the observed behavior and an offer to meet the need of the person feeling the tension.

In extreme cases, if the person's need is not met, the defense behavior may become overbearing or counterproductive. For example, if an Analytical feels like no one is paying attention to the data they have presented, they may seek to disengage until they can find more data that proves their case. This is unproductive tension and takes them out of the collaboration space. In this kind of situation, take a moment to identify the behavior and show the impact to the team.

"Don, if you leave now to run more tests, it could really slow the project down. I think your data is sound. You did the right thing sharing it. Let's see what areas of the plan we can modify to meet the deadline and avoid putting the project at risk."

By accommodating the need of the Analytical you reduce his tension and help him move to more productive behavior.

Balance Tension for Maximum Results

While this can certainly be challenging to accomplish, the payoff is well worth it. Each type brings a strength to the table that project teams need to achieve great results. Drivers make sure things get done on time. Expressives often have big ideas and keep the team motivated. Amiables make sure everyone is on board and that consensus is achieved. Analyticals make sure that decisions are data-driven.

Teams that work in this way challenge each other to push boundaries and reach stretch goals. The tension will certainly rise as deadlines approach and personalities run up against each other. A skilled project leader recognizes the behaviors that can derail the process, adapts to meet the needs of the individuals, and coaches team members to do the same.

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Too much tension will derail the team, driving people away from the table and slowing production. Too little tension and the team won't feel the challenge – and the eventual payoff – of the endeavor. Part of managing the tension is to be [clear about the potential benefit of accomplishing higher than average results](#). The project leader needs to communicate the benefit of reaching those goals and create an environment where tension is fostered, managed and directed toward concrete outcomes.

About the Author

Rob Zell has over 15 years of experience as an educator and trainer. During his career, he has designed, developed and delivered learning content for IT, field operations, support staff and trainers in the restaurant and retail industry as well as in schools. His primary focus has been on improving operational results by developing management and communication skills to help leaders get more done with the teams they have. He is currently a training professional and coach with a leading global retailer.

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To date, we have trained over 40,000 people, including over 6,000 on the Project Management Professional (PMP®) certification exam preparation. We co-developed the innovative blended learning PMP® exam preparation program that earned PMI's Professional Development Product of the Year award in 2007. We are a PM Training Alliance® (PMTA) Certified Training Provider (CTP), and Project Management Institute® (PMI) Global Registered Education Provider (REP).

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