



Peacekeepers tell themselves that avoiding conflict keeps relationships on an even keel and preserves the orderly function of the organization. In fact, the opposite is true.

MANAGEMENT BY COACHING

By Kimberly Paterson, CEC

THE BAD HABIT: AVOIDING CONFLICT

Overcoming the destructive behavior that can end a promising career

It was 5:15 on Thursday evening. Josh was still at his desk fixing a report submitted by his teammate Barb. The report was three days late and filled with typos and incorrect information. The document reflected on the entire team, and Josh was uncomfortable forwarding it to his manager.

To add insult to injury, Barb had waltzed out of the office 45 minutes earlier without any apology for the late report. Josh was fuming. He felt the familiar throbbing pain on the right side of his head, signaling another migraine. He'd had it with Barb. Over-confident in her position as the senior person on the team, she seldom pulled her weight. Josh was constantly cleaning up her backlog, handling her client calls while she took extended lunch hours, and compensating for her shortcomings.

As frustrated as he was, Josh tolerated Barb's behavior. In his eyes, confronting her was not an option. It was simply too high a risk. Barb was not someone you questioned. She was forceful, aggressive, and when challenged, gave the appearance she might go ballistic at any second. Josh is what is often referred to as a "peacekeeper" personality—someone who is committed to avoiding conflict at all costs.

It's important to differentiate between peacekeepers and "peacemakers." Peacemakers are people who recognize when a conflict has gone far enough and try to find ways to bring it to a successful resolution. Peacemakers act by rational choice. Peacekeepers do whatever they can to keep conflict from rising to begin with. They act out of fear and compulsion. By suppressing their natural reactions and emotions, they increase tension in groups and relationships by sweeping unvoiced feelings under the rug.

According to James Waldroop, Ph.D., and Timothy Butler, Ph.D., directors of MBA Career Development at Harvard Business School, "Avoiding conflict" is one of 12 discrete behavior patterns that consistently derail careers or get

people fired. The behaviors are consistent from one industry to another, from the lowest to the highest level employees. (For two of the other 12 patterns, see *Rough Notes*, April 2021: "The Bulldozer" and *Rough Notes*, June 2021: "Never Feeling Good Enough.")

Spotting the conflict avoidance pattern

Peacekeepers are phobic about the possibility of confrontation. They're paralyzed by the uncertainty of how things may turn out. They worry that things will spin out of control and that people may say something that will permanently damage relationships. As a result, someone may be hurt, quit, cry, get angry, or have a meltdown.

Peacekeepers think that avoiding conflict keeps relationships on an even keel and preserves the orderly function of the organization. The opposite is true. The inability to surface issues, disagree, and productively resolve conflict ultimately undermines relationships and teams and can become destructive to the organization. Circumventing confrontation is their form of self-protection. They say they put people's feelings first but, in reality, they put suppressing feelings first.

The peacekeeper pattern is especially apparent and problematic when people step into leadership roles. Peacekeepers have a high need to be liked. They don't take risk, fight for resources, advocate for their team, confront peers when things aren't working, or address direct reports' performance issues. High-performing employees who report to peacekeeper managers tend to jump ship and seek opportunities elsewhere.

Peacekeeper leaders suppress their true thoughts and feelings to avoid conflict. They like everyone and agree with everything. People never know what they think. As a result, they're often viewed as weak and untrustworthy by their managers, peers and direct reports.

How the organization is impacted

Conflict avoidance exists in all levels of the organization, from frontline workers and managers to senior leaders and boards of directors. In some organizations it's deeply embedded in the culture. The price tag to both individuals and the organization is steep:

- **Limits on growth potential.** The clash of opposing ideas and strategies is a dynamic, creative process that reveals the strengths and weaknesses that can ultimately produce better outcomes. People who go out of their way to avoid conflict often suppress creative ideas that might improve the organization. They fear pushback or resistance from people who might feel threatened or oppose the ideas for other reasons. Peacekeepers handcuff themselves as they worry about other people reacting negatively. They become conservative in their thinking in order to minimize the risk of conflict. When in a leadership role, the individual may stifle others' creativity and encourage status quo thinking. By avoiding controversial topics, opportunities are squandered through inaction.
- **Underperforming employees.** Leaders who are uncomfortable with conflict tend to avoid sharing the direct feedback their people need to perform at their highest level. In their desire to keep the peace, they tend to overlook bad behavior, which hurts their credibility and creates tension among team members.
- **Reduced productivity.** Managers report that they spend anywhere from 20% to 40% of their time dealing with conflict. When conflict is unresolved, people engage in resource-sapping avoidance tactics, including ruminating excessively about crucial issues, complaining, getting angry, doing unnecessary work and avoiding the other person altogether. This time is wasted because it detracts from important work and doesn't lead to resolution.
- **Mistakes.** Healthy conflict is necessary for teams to learn from past mistakes, take decisive action and tap into the entire team's talent and experience. When people avoid conflict, mistakes that might have been exposed or resolved through open debate go undiscovered and unfixed.
- **Missed time from work.** A study commissioned by CPP, Inc., the publishers of the Myers-Briggs Assessment, revealed that 25% of employees said that avoiding conflict led to sickness or absence from work.

- **Higher employee turnover.** The CPP, Inc., study also indicated that one-third of respondents said that conflict resulted in someone leaving the company, either through firing or quitting.

Root cause of the behavior

Like most deeply engrained behavior, the peacekeeper pattern typically begins in childhood. It equally impacts men and women. A common cause is a child lacking positive role models for surfacing and resolving conflict. Kids may receive the message that "we don't argue," or "we don't talk about our feelings," or "if you don't have something nice to say, don't say it." The flip side of the coin is that the family may constantly be in conflict—arguing but never resolving anything. A healthy attitude about conflict comes from seeing people voice their feelings, disagree, get angry, find some resolution and still like, respect or love each other when things cool down.

A weak sense of self also contributes. This person fears they won't be able to get their point across in the face of opposition. Think of an introverted child, with seven extroverted brothers and sisters, who could never get a word in at the dinner table. At an early age, the child may give up fighting to be heard. Another cause is growing up something of a loner on the fringe of the family. Think child prodigy violinist born into a family of athletes who live, eat and drink sports. Always feeling like the outsider, this child craves acceptance. That unmet need can be exacerbated in adulthood in settings where the individual is a minority in terms of race, gender, or socioeconomic status.

Coaching a peacekeeper

If you choose to do the coaching yourself, keep two fundamental goals in mind: 1) desensitize the person to conflict and 2) build their skills at handling conflict. Like someone afraid of flying or terrified of spiders, the peacekeeper is phobic about conflict. Logic won't calm their anxiety or remove their fear. Here are four techniques that work:

1. Allay their fear that they need to change from a conflict avoider to a conflict seeker.

People worry they'll be asked to become something they're not or end up being like the people they dislike. Explain that there are some situations where they'll need to behave more like a lion and less like a lamb. That doesn't mean changing who they are.

2. Start with observation. Ask them to identify some co-workers who don't shy away from conflict and then spend time observing them when conflict arises. How do they talk, what is their body language, how do they approach others? If there is one person in the group they admire, have them pay special attention to that individual. In addition to gaining information, this begins the desensitization process by enabling the individual to get closer to conflict without feeling threatened.

3. Learn post-conflict follow-up. Peacekeepers fear irreparable damage to relationships. Show them how to normalize relationships after a conflict has occurred. The indirect way is to stop in the colleague's office or call if working remotely. Re-establish the relationship by talking briefly about a business topic or something unrelated to business. For example: "How is your husband doing after his knee surgery," or "I see your son's team made the state finals." The key is to re-establish your connection. If the conflict was really heated, being direct works better. Say something like "Things got pretty heated in there today. I want you to know that I appreciate your concerns; in this case we just see things differently. I value our relationship and want to make sure we're okay. If we're not, I want to do whatever we need to do to get okay."

4. Build the muscle. Behavior change is most effective when people gradually build the muscle they need to strengthen. An effective way to begin is to have the person list the situations and people they avoid conflict with at work and home and rank the list from most to least difficult. Start with the easiest item on the list and have the individual script out what they would really like to say to that person or in that situation. Next, work with the coachee to get the dialogue right. Starting with easier interactions and gradually tackling the tougher ones helps to desensitize conflict. Repeated practice develops the muscle and the coachee's confidence that they can successfully manage conflict.

While peacekeepers may be extreme in their aversion to conflict, they are not alone. According to a study conducted by authors of the *New York Times* bestselling book *Crucial Conversations*, 95% of an organization's workforce struggles to speak up to their colleagues about their concerns. Leaders who take the time to coach

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success. They know that the most important part of building a culture of customer service is the first contact with a customer. Whether it's electronic, over the phone, or in person, the first contact is what gets customer service efforts off to a great start.

An amazing front-line staff has the empathy and the instincts needed to make a positive first impression. They are quick-thinking and provide calm and friendly direction to meet client needs. These skills are good for all team members who interact with customers. Anyone can learn to build better relationships by practicing a friendly, listening-focused conversation style in every business interaction. As team members grow these skills, they also strengthen the trust customers have in the insurance agency or company brand. If a customer can't trust your business, its perceived value to them diminishes.

4. **Make problem solving an art.**

Insurance organizations that build a customer service culture empower their team members to solve customer issues. This empowerment can take many forms, but it almost always has the same goal: to give employees the opportunity to really make a difference for customers. Insurance agencies and companies should always lead with this spirit.

Empowering team members to improve customer service can be as simple as organizing brainstorming sessions to find impactful solutions to common problems. These sessions can build trust among employees and often lead to the type of graceful accountability that's beneficial for customers and the business alike. There are also more formalized methods of employee engagement, like process reviews and improvement plans. Implementing any one of these helps to create a more nuanced and productive customer service culture.

5. **Support graceful accountability.**

Organizations with a great customer service culture hold their team members accountable with grace and respect. Even though accountability often sends a message of punishment or of being reprimanded, finding fault doesn't have to be its sole focus. Graceful accountability can help you create the culture of customer service that can make your insurance agency thrive.

When employees in an organization feel accountable for the service they provide, they work hard for customers and their team. That

effect then ripples throughout the business. Teams don't want to let other teams down. Such a ripple effect also works from the top down. A business thrives when its leadership teams stay accountable to the departments and individual employees they lead. The best way for supervisors to create this graceful accountability within their teams is by investing in professional training and always leading with encouragement.

Consider this football analogy: Football is a team sport. For the team's offense or defense to have success, all the players must play their positions well. If the offensive line doesn't block well, the quarterback will get sacked. If the receivers drop passes, the team's efforts are for nothing. Accountability means that everyone is in it together and they depend on everyone else to do their best to keep customers satisfied and happy.

6. **Celebrate wins proudly and often.**

An often-overlooked trait found in companies with cultures of customer service is that they celebrate together and frequently. Culturally focused insurance organizations celebrate milestones, team successes, individual accomplishments, anniversaries, and each other's differences. They know that they have something special and they're proud of it. When someone delivers great service, they share the story with others. When someone overcomes a particularly hard challenge, they recognize it. When disaster strikes, they work together to overcome and are celebrated for it.

Story time

In a visit to a medium-sized town years ago, I checked into a hotel that I had visited previously under former management. The old, worldwide chain property was sold to a local owner who then rebranded it. I was greeted by a very energetic and sweet employee at reception. While I had not reserved a room on the concierge floor, she recommended it, noting that it would only be a few extra dollars for my night's stay. I agreed and headed to my room before I realized that I had left something in my car and ran back downstairs to retrieve it. As I passed through the lobby, the desk clerk called out, "Mr. Martin, is everything in your room all right?"

I was impressed. Most people forget names within minutes of meeting new people. As the evening went on, I decided to visit the concierge lounge and was stunned. It was packed and I soon found out why. The receptionist

was supplying everyone with tasty drinks and snacks in a classy, but relaxed manner. The service during the rest of my stay was similar, including the treatment from the banquet staff the next day.

I wondered how the management had built such a customer-oriented service culture. On a visit months later, I learned the story about when the town was hit by a hurricane. Relying on a giant generator, the small hotel staff took in hundreds of police officers, national guard troops, emergency workers, and claims adjusters. The concierge said the staff pulled together to invent new ways to keep the guests happy.

There's more to the story, of course, but in short, they built their customer service culture under some of the worst conditions imaginable for a hotel. They depended on each other to provide quality service, and the owner was smart enough to realize that it wasn't his leadership but the teamwork of housekeepers, cooks, and front desk staff that had changed the culture of the company overnight. ■

The author

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and model healthy conflict will reap the rewards of increased employee engagement and loyalty and a more productive work environment. ■

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