

## **B – 1 Embrace Creative Conflict: Encourage the Healthy Aspects of Conflict to Reach Better Decisions in the Workplace**

Years ago, when the University of Georgia Law Library transitioned to team based management, no one involved had any idea about creative conflict. The transition happened as a result of shared frustration over poor communications between functional units and a common sense that change and innovation were generally stymied by fear and zero sum thinking. Versions of “We’ve always done it this way” and “if they get X, we’ll be denied Y” were too often heard or felt.

The management team, the Steering Group, composed of all the librarians, began with only a few solid notions of how to proceed: regular face to face meetings, shared leadership, working from an agenda everyone had in hand well before each meeting, prompt posting of minutes, and ground rules. Unknown to the group, we also had the most important ingredients of our long term success—hardworking, stubborn, creative, proud, intelligent, obstinate librarians who all cared very deeply about the institution. If there seem to be as many insults as compliments in that list, it is deliberate. The library director for most of the history of the Steering Group, Ann Puckett, has described us as “the most difficult people she has ever worked with”, and also as “the most productive”.

As everyone might imagine, the process through which our working group became as productive as it is today was neither straightforward nor painless. We were lucky. The other necessary ingredients to make that journey positive were either already in place, or we were able to learn them from our many mistakes. And, we did make many mistakes. There were shouting matches, put downs, attempts to steam roll the group, hurt feelings, even tears.

Nonetheless, it turned out that precisely what makes us difficult (stubbornness, pride, obstinance) also helped us make the most of our creativity and intelligence. Those half negative traits, coupled with our shared broad objectives, a universal commitment to group decision making, and respect for one another led us naturally to creative conflict. It was surprising to discover that nurturing this way of interacting and decision making is actually an accepted management tool.

### **Just what is creative conflict?**

- Method for group decision making that:
  - encourages conflicting ideas
  - Puts all perspectives and interests on the table
  - Enables the entire group to defend and critique each idea
  - Utilizes consensus as the ultimate decision mechanism
  - Relies on the process of decision making to strengthen and improve decisions

### **In what ways does creative conflict lead to better decision making?**

- Encourages and values diverse ideas, that are then tested and challenged by the group

- The sum of this process is generally more creative and effective than any of the individual ideas
- Gives all participants a voice
  - The full range of interests are aired and acknowledged
- Bonds the participants
  - Everyone contributes ideas, critiques, arguments—the ultimate solution is truly a group product
- Produces greater buy-in
  - Each participant owns the solution
- Aiming for consensus often slows the process down, which provides valuable time for new ideas, greater understanding of the ideas and interests on the table, and deeper self awareness in each participant

## What ingredients are necessary for successful creative conflict?

- A receptive organizational culture
  - Creativity is valued
  - Risk is encouraged
  - Diversity is welcome
  - Healthy conflict is normalized
    - Conflict of *ideas*
    - Not interpersonal
    - Based on mutual trust and respect
  - Decision making is shared
- Supporting, participating leadership
  - Believes in the process
  - Contributes to consensus building
  - Is comfortable with conflict
- Strong, committed participants
  - Confidant in own ability
  - Forward looking
  - Open to new ideas
  - Comfortable with difference
- Sound, workable process
  - Agree upon rules
    - participate actively
    - bring all relevant issues to the group
    - appreciate all issues and ideas as important
    - share all relevant information
    - test assumptions and inferences; be willing to be challenged and influenced

- deliver and respond to statements, questions and actions with respect and consideration
  - discuss “undiscussable” issues
  - explain the reasoning and intent behind statements, questions, and actions; avoid broad generalizations; use specific examples; agree on what important words mean
  - keep discussion focused
  - be patient with the process and with one another
  - support and accept responsibility for the work of the group
- Exchange perspectives
- Explore interests
- Agree on mutual problem statement
- Brainstorm options
- Evaluate options
- Decide
- Constructive, positive tone
  - Expectation of collaboration
  - Striving for consensus
  - Climate of friendly rivalry
  - Relaxed attitude
  - Refusal to allow disagreements to become personal