

UNRESOLVED CONFLICT: THE SILENT ASSASSIN

In one of Matthew McConaughey's latest movies "The Englishmen," the movie opens to a scene where he is sitting comfortably at a table in his pub. As the leader and kingpin of his organization, he feels extremely safe in his establishment. Then, in the background we see a silent assassin pull out a gun with a silencer, point it at McConaughey's character Michael Pearson, a shot rings out, and the scene fades out (Richie, 2019). Unresolved conflict is a silent killer of leadership and team cohesion. If left unchecked, unresolved conflict can wound the decision-making process and kill unity in organizational leadership during a crisis.

Conflict and controversy are in themselves neither good nor bad. It's how they are handled that determines outcomes. Controversy is the conflict that arises when two people want to agree, however, one person's ideas, information, conclusions, theories, or opinions may not be compatible with the others. In Michael Pearson's world, controversy arises due to disagreements among junior leaders. All the senior leaders, except for Pearson, failed to recognize the danger they were in and didn't take action to resolve the issues. As the movie plays out the storyline is expanded, and the first scene is revisited. In this second take, we see Pearson's right-hand man enter the front door, and the shot that was heard earlier is shown to be his right-hand man taking down the assassin, saving Pearson just in the nick of time. Take a moment and think of your ability as a leader to resolve conflict. Think of conflict resolution as if it were your right-hand man because it is! Conflict resolution skills can save you from disastrous decisions, unite your organization, and defend it from outside pressures.

When dealing with unresolved conflict lookout for the following types of behaviors that can become silent assassins:

Cheetah – This is the person who has unresolved conflict toward you or your team and lurks in the grass, and when you least expect it, it jumps out and puts the squeeze on a decision or action you want to make.

Lion – They are more interested in winning than coming to an agreement that is most beneficial to all involved.

Sloth – The passive-aggressive type that will simply slow everything down to a crawl.

Golden Retriever – Will agree with anything even though they don't think it's a promising idea. They may even have information that would change your mind but won't share it leaving you at the mercy of making decisions without enough information.

Ostrich – Scared to speak up, scared of confrontation, scared to give an opinion for fear of rejection.

Weasel – This is the saboteur. The one who says they agree but are secretly telling others about the solution they think is best.

UNRESOLVED CONFLICT: THE SILENT ASSASSIN

The good news is that your right-hand man (your conflict resolution skills) can be sharpened to mitigate, negate, and avoid these behaviors. The first step in the process is to understand group dynamics and decision making. There are five stages in a group's lifecycle; (a) Forming, (b) Storming, (c) Norming, (d) Performing, and (e) Adjourning (Johnson & Johnson, 2013). When a strike force, a new committee, or decision-making body (team) is formed, the leader should expect controversy and conflict to arise in the storming stage and prepare to handle it. Some might think that the higher one goes in leadership that the Storming stage would lessen in intensity. The opposite is quite true. Normally high-performing teams are made up of strong leaders. Strong leaders can clash with far more impact than that of junior leaders or first level teams. Make sure to have a conflict resolution process in place. It should be spelled out in your team's charter.

The second step and an important factor to note is that consensus is the most reliable way to make important decisions, however, it is also the most time consuming, (Johnson & Johnson, 2013). Consensus means that each team member truly backs the decision, even if there are parts of it they don't like. Everyone must be committed to the decision or consensus has not been reached. During the consensus process, group discussions provide leaders the opportunity to identify negative behaviors and dissenting attitudes. As the leader you will be able to engage the person(s), coach them through the situation, and make them feel appreciated as part of the decision making process. By using the following process, each of the silent assassin types listed above can be identified and mitigated. As you identify those who may be dissenting, be proactive, engage them in conversion, and make sure that they have a chance to present their ideas and why they believe them.

1. Prioritize the importance of the decision or issue to make sure coming to a consensus is the right course of action. If it is a significant issue, be positive, and treat it with the respect and importance it commands.
2. Gather all parties involved and ask at least one trusted but outside neutral person to take part.
3. Have each individual research why they believe what they believe and provide their justification as to why they believe their idea is correct. Each person should be able to defend and advocate for their position.
4. After each person has shared their position and the basis for them, have the group discuss all the ideas. This is called Group Idea Exchange. The outcome of this exchange will be more uncertainty and that's ok, it's normal at this stage.
5. After the Group Idea Exchange, identify no more than three best answers. Rethink them, with the group's input, and come to a consensus. More than likely, the solution will be a combination of several of the ideas presented.

UNRESOLVED CONFLICT: THE SILENT ASSASSIN

Although this process will help, it isn't bullet proof. Leaders should still be diligent and be aware of the actions of those around them. If your intuition is telling you something, pull the person aside, and have an informal one-on-one. There is nothing like a face-to-face meeting (even over Zoom) to be able to read a person's body language and facial expressions. One last tip, don't ever ignore the rumor mill. Go directly to the person(s) involved and discuss what was heard. Many times, the rumor mill creates shadows, where silent assassins wait to strike.

Using this five-step approach, will allow you as a leader to facilitate group discussions, identity, coach, and correct negative behaviors. It also ensures that each person is engaged, making them feel appreciated. When a person feels that their ideas were listened to and valued, they are more likely to accept the group's decision without holding onto any negative feelings that may have arisen during the process. Proactive conflict resolution builds team cohesion, enhances cooperation, and aligns team members promoting organizational unity.

If you would like more information on Leadership or Organizational Development, Greg can be reached at Gregory.Buschman@gmail.com

**Greg Buschman, Ph.D.(c),
Creative Leadership for Innovation and Change**

Best Selling New Release Author in Business Management, January 2020. Coach Buschman, is a leadership, organization development, and change management expert. His hallmark is improving effectiveness by coaching and developing current and emerging leaders. His training programs have touched thousands of professionals. In his latest book, "I Think, You Think, We All Think Differently: Leadership Skills for Millennials & Gen Z," he helps bridge the leadership gap between Boomer, Gen X, Millennial, and Gen Z leaders. www.gregbuschman.com

