

HANDLING CONFLICT IN TEAMS

As a leader, how do you encourage team members to challenge each other constructively, whilst valuing diversity of thought and outlook?

Leaders we know have talked about the value of setting time aside for the team to agree their shared purpose, build team trust, and anticipate how to handle the clashes of view that are bound to happen.

These leaders create a safe space to surface potential tensions with questions like:

- How well do we listen to each other and value each other's perspectives, rather than align with people who look and think like us?
- How can we help each other to notice when feelings are getting in the way of rational discussion?
- How well do we understand each other's personalities, and what prompts each individual's best and least constructive behaviours?
- What unconscious programming might be at work in the way we interact – for example might one person be accustomed to stepping in and taking charge, whilst another stays silent for fear of criticism?

When these leaders notice a conflict brewing, they aim to listen carefully to all sides of the argument. Normally they then give their judgement, accepting that their decisions will not please everyone but that all should feel they have been heard and be prepared to move on. If tensions continue to simmer, they may decide to go deeper. Quotes include:

- “I encouraged everyone to imagine they were observing the team from a balcony as an outsider or client. They could then laugh at their behaviours and focus on the outcome they all needed.”
- “I called out the hurt and emotion on both sides but did not take sides. Then we worked collectively on a way forward.”
- “I deliberately assigned the role of convenor to the regular critic on the team, so that they became responsible for finding a way forward.”

They recognise that each member of the team, including the leader, may need to be ready to shift their thinking and behaviours in the interests of joint success.

This Prompt is one of a series on managing conflict.