

HANDLING CONFLICT: “US AND THEM”

As a leader, how do you handle an “us and them” mentality between groups, teams or organisations that need to collaborate? Loyalty to the group can be a positive attribute but can also lead to siloed thinking. The risk is that each side is hijacked by untested assumptions, and positions become polarised to the detriment of progress.

Leaders tell us they start by encouraging each group or side to reflect on questions like:

- What are the consequences if we can’t find a way to collaborate with the others?
- What ‘s the history that has led to mistrust? What assumptions are we making about the others and how do we know these assumptions are true?
- If we were transferred tomorrow into the other team or organisation, how might we see things differently?

Leaders may ask a neutral party to collate the perspectives from each side and share the insights. It can be surprising to see how views are mirrored.

When leaders bring the sides together, they look to build mutual understanding by exploring feelings as well as facts, accepting this may take time. Their aim is to:

- Encourage everyone to identify the common ground and purpose
- Be patient in listening to the stories that can fuel suspicion and underlie the mistrust
- Use analogies that resonate – such as the need to set aside club loyalties when playing for the national side
- Look for “third way” solutions which allow movement without loss of face
- Help with building a shared narrative that can be sold to external constituents.

Building mutual understanding is harder when one group or side sees its function as financing or regulating the other. One Finance Director told us that after a year of acrimony between him and a fellow member of the Executive team: “I realised it needed one of us to suggest that the system was setting us up to disagree. I suggested we should talk, and we navigated our differences.”

Most people come to work to do a good job. How can you help to reconcile conflicting perspectives or priorities in the interests of a shared purpose?

This Prompt is one of a series on managing conflict.