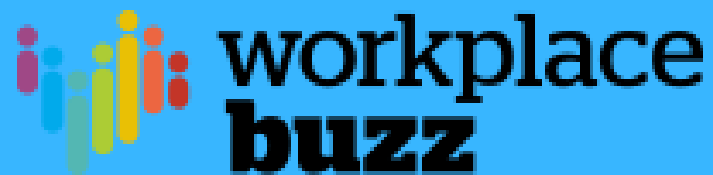

Prepared by
WorkplaceBuzz

Created on
July 2020

CREATIVE ABRASION: PRODUCTIVE CONFLICT

By
Dr. Mark Slaski,
C.Psychol, AFBPsS



What is it?

A term coined by Jerry Hirshberg of Nissan Design International, creative abrasion refers to a style of thinking and working in teams, that moves conflict into a positive and useful place to develop ideas.

A good leader will be able to direct oppositions, challenges and clashes into productive activity. Rather than remaining in a state of disruptive (or destructive) conflict, where the focus is on attacking and discrediting, creative abrasion is about shifting that into debate, ideas and questioning. It isn't about avoiding conflict, it's about using conflict.

The use of creative abrasion in the workplace is in evaluating ideas. It's about poking and pulling and prodding ideas to find their weaknesses and to constructively challenge with new, opposing viewpoints. Critically, it is a key process in avoiding dysfunctional "groupthink".

How do you get it?

Prof. Linda Hill of Harvard Business School once wrote, "You do not get innovation usually without diversity and conflict".

Getting into a state compatible for creative abrasion involves leaders, firstly, getting into the right mindset. Understanding that conflict is natural, but that you can channel it into a productive and useful tool requires a mental shift in your personal view of conflict. It requires accepting conflict in itself, accepting the people that bring it and their reasons for doing so. Conflict can only become creative if the leader makes it so.

Secondly, conflict needs to be acknowledged. Discuss how it arose in your team, point out the consequences it's likely to produce (name the elephant in the room). Part of this process involves building a strong foundation of trust and respect. As leader, you show that these things can be acknowledged and discussed and offer a baseline of freedom and safety to allow others to do so as well.

Finally, consideration needs to be made for resolution planning. How are you and your team going to address conflict together? To become useful, an underlying, disciplined creative process needs to be developed and its ground rules made explicit. Will you be delegating a 'Devil's Advocate' for debates? Will you take turns challenging and sponsoring ideas? Whichever structure you decide to build, ensure its foundations are respect and trust.

Of course, for there to even be opposing views to debate, there needs to be a diverse enough group of people and ideas to collide. Hiring and involving individuals with different backgrounds, different experiences and different thinking styles is necessary for strong debates. Brining in people with conflicting cognitive biases is a great way to develop divergent thinking in groups.

Benefits

The pay-out for this shift to creative abrasion are numerous, not least in avoiding the 'comfortable clone syndrome'. Having a team full of nodding 'yes-men' may well never have conflict, but you're unlikely to have anything resembling innovation either! It is also a route to building synergy and empathy across a team. It trains colleagues to really listen alternate views and to responding to questioning without the need to automatic defence. And all this leads to accelerated learning for everyone involved.

Summed up nicely by Daniel Dworkin of Schaffer Consulting, "It's not about being right or wrong, it's about helping the collective to think together in a way that no individual on that team could achieve."