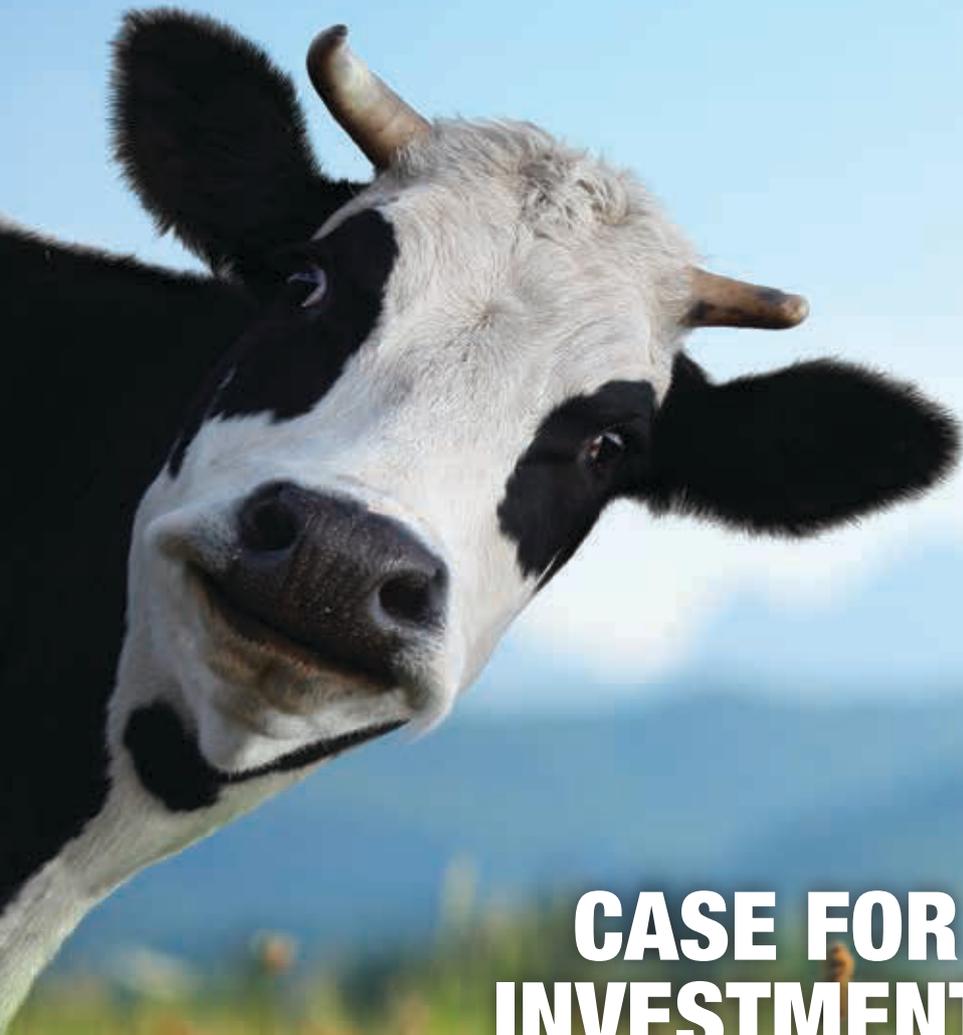


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Unresolved conflict ultimately impacts on the effectiveness of any business

By Catherine Gillespie, Managing Director, Workplace Conflict Resolution



A successful business makes well informed, high-quality decisions via teams that operate from a high-performance culture. The two 'teams' making major decisions in a business are the Board of Directors and Senior Management.

To promote quality decision making, many organisations refer to a 'decision making matrix'. A matrix might guide a team to focus on specific objectives, strategy and the required information. However, the use of a matrix alone will not ensure effective decision making if the team members are in conflict and cannot communicate effectively with one another.

Good Boards and Senior Management teams consistently role model constructive and ethical behaviours that create and enforce the expected culture of the organisation. One of these behaviours is the ability to engage in positive conflict (robust and open conversation) through the use of appropriate communication skills.

Unfortunately, many teams at the senior levels of organisations do not communicate in this manner and decision making meetings either degenerate into argument or become a situation where there is limited input from most parties because their voices are never noted and they have given up trying to be heard. Either way, the effectiveness of the decision reached, the cohesiveness of the team and resulting impacts on the business would have to be questioned. Group decision making has the ability to be superior to decisions made by individuals only when the group has a high level of emotional intelligence.

Daniel Goleman, author of 'The New Leaders' notes if a team lacks harmony or the ability to cooperate, decision making quality and speed suffer. He describes group emotional intelligence as a team's ability to manage its emotions in such a way that an environment is created which values trust and constructive questioning. This environment encourages optimal decision making and contributes to the shaping of the team's identity and capacity to perform effectively. For a team to have 'group emotional intelligence', the individual team members need to be emotionally intelligent.

Being emotionally intelligent includes being able to manage one's emotions, be cognizant of situations or communications which might create emotional reactions in others and being empathetic towards others. Managing one's emotions is the cornerstone of being able to participate in rigorous debate without the escalation of conflict. Conflict is fuelled by our emotional reactions to misunderstanding and fear.

Many Directors and Senior Executives would argue they are not fearful, but in this way, they are not being mindful of their unconscious reactions to hidden conflict triggers. Fear is not a conscious thought – it can be a reaction to something seemingly insignificant (someone raising their voice, rolling their eyes or being dismissive of your opinion)

or to something very significant (perhaps the limitation of resources required to keep the business profitable or venturing into new markets). Because emotions are contagious, there must be at least one person present in the meeting who is not swayed by emotion (but can display appropriate emotions) and can remain logical at all times. Herein lies the importance of the meeting Chair.

In his book 'Building a Better Board', Richard LeBlanc says 'It will come as no surprise to anyone that the leadership skills of the chairman is the single most important factor in determining effective board processes, optimal decision making and overall effectiveness of a board of directors.'

The Chair must create a constructive team meeting culture in which collaboration and open, robust debate is embraced. The Chair must always provide an opportunity for every team member to contribute to the decision making process and ensure that appropriate and respectful behaviours are consistently displayed.

While facilitating debate, the Chair must also work to minimise conflict by asking questions to reduce opportunities for misunderstanding and by reframing or rephrasing negative or ambiguous statements to foster a positive climate in the meeting. Being a leader is also about fostering leadership skills in others. This can be achieved by role modelling, creating or offering experiences and training. A good Chair works to develop the emotional intelligence of each team member.

Not all senior personnel welcome opportunities to learn about and build their emotional intelligence, but are often very receptive to participating in workshops. Teams usually welcome such training because people sense or know when there are tensions in meetings due to the presence of conflict and are fully aware of the impact this has on their and other's participation and the overall effectiveness of the decisions being made.

Centro is a classic example of a Board that did not engage in robust debate to ensure optimal decision making. It would seem that to challenge opinion created conflict (as it went against the norms of the expected team culture). In addition, it would seem this conflict was not constructively addressed and fully resolved.

Successful teams engage in positive conflict, promptly resolve negative conflict and foster growth in individual and group emotional intelligence. These traits are the foundations of a high-performing, constructive team which sets the culture for the whole organisation and makes sound decisions that directly impact on the success of the business.

The author draws on her own experiences of working with Boards and Senior Executive Teams and learnings from the AICD, Company Directors Course, Decision Making Module.