



HOW TO DEAL WITH CONFLICT AND DISRUPTION IN GLOBAL TEAMS

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A mix of research and personal experience on growing from conflict.



A Conectys made, Whitepaper
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THE ONLY THING CONSTANT IS CHANGE, RIGHT? AND ALSO ...

We're writing this initially in April 2020, about two months into the COVID-19 global pandemic. There has certainly been a tremendous amount of disruption: layoffs, businesses that may never return, questions of individual health vs. the health of the economy, and more. Issues that aren't inherently political have become even more political than normal. Businesses are legitimately struggling to keep the lights on, and rapidly pivoting to work models they've never embraced.

Disruption.

Now, what's going to come from all of that? There will be some "business as usual" once the health elements are figured out, of course. But there's going to be a lot of change as well.

But changes will come, and they come from disruption. A pandemic is, by definition, a huge disruption.

Disruption drives change.

But disruption can also lead to conflict for organizations: think about managers screaming at employees, unclear priorities, gossip, high turnover rates, millions out the door in training and recruitment, etc.

So here's the problem we need to solve: we know disruption is important, and honestly inevitable. We will have to deal with it, whether it's at a global level, an industry level, or an individual level (i.e. argument with a co-worker).

How do we manage for "good conflict" as opposed to "bad conflict," that results from disruption?


THE FIRST TERM TO KNOW: "PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY"

In 2012, Google launched something called "[Project Aristotle.](#)" The idea was [to study hundreds of different Google teams](#) and see why certain teams over-performed while others faltered. There has been a lot of management research since 2012 on what Project Aristotle proved and didn't prove, but one general consensus is that teams need a high degree of "psychological safety" in order to excel.




Psychological safety does not imply that conflict will disappear. Teams will still disagree about strategy and action. What it implies, instead, is that a team member can voice a different opinion -- speak up -- and feels comfortable enough with the team and the respect among the team members that he/she won't get shouted down or ignored. It's about a supportive, caring work environment allowing projects to get done. It's about safe spots to push back on elements of a project that seem out of scope or line.

There will still be conflict, but it's managed in a better way.

Let's look at a couple of internal and external situations in the customer experience (CX) and user generated content (UGC) moderation worlds and how this idea of "[psychological safety](#)" relates to outsourcing partnerships:

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Internal to a team: One major conflict of late is work-from-home approaches. (More on this in the next section, too.) How do managers know that employees are delivering for clients if everyone is spread out all day? How can employees voice issues or improvements if their manager is slammed in Zoom calls all week

with little time to connect? Teams with high degrees of psychological safety can overcome hurdles faster -- in part because lower-hierarchy employees are more comfortable making empowered decisions, knowing that if they're the "wrong" decision, a discussion and course-correction will follow, not an immediate termination.

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Outsourced team to a client: One of the biggest conflicts you see here is increased demand (client side) vs. decreased or stagnant capacity to meet said demand (outsourced team). In our earlier days of scaling, we ran into this sometimes. You foster psychological safety in client relationships by being fully transparent with each other and constantly level-setting. The client is paying you, and by that sheer transaction, they deserve to know everything going on with their business-critical functions in real-time. That builds trust and rapport, and all that underscores a long future of working together.
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UGC: What happens when communities lose a sense of psychological safety? In short: people leave the communities. Who wants to post about their life and their viewpoints in a forum where they don't feel safe? Safety and speed are the two most essential things that an outsourced UGC moderator can provide. Without those elements, there's no community. Without immediate conflict management, there's no long-term community. This is increasingly relevant right now because many have extra time on their hands, and that's [leading to an explosion of UGC](#). Without the right moderators, you will have lots of conflict on your platforms. With conflict in this case comes revenue loss -- and it extrapolates quickly. As users leave your platform, others leave behind them because the conversations and content are less robust. Not good.
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CX: There's actually been a sharp uptick globally in people buying products online -- logical, as many stores are closed and people want to limit their exposure to crowds, and public places. This demand surge means CX providers are stressed, executives are stressed, decision-making can be haywire in pockets, and patience and other norms are not always there. There's a lot of potential for conflict. "Psychological safety" here means intuitive platforms for customers to get what they want, a fostering of trust, and quick resolution of issues. Reduced conflict means more revenue, short- and long-term. Bueno.

WHY IS A BPO WRITING ABOUT CONFLICT RESOLUTION ANYWAY? (HINT: DECISIVENESS.)

We have been in business since 2004. We've encountered lots of conflicts and disruption in that time, and we don't mean that necessarily in a bad way. A lot of said conflict has grown our business! But BPOs are uniquely positioned to think about conflict resolution, because anytime an issue comes up, it immediately impacts two very significant groups: your internal employees, and then your clients, who are expecting you to manage business-critical aspects for them without interruption.

Take COVID in winter/spring 2020. Our main goal, in order to resolve any conflicts therein, was to be quick and decisive. That's the essence of business continuity. We went through a series of different steps, as [outlined by our CEO](#) in this LinkedIn post, that included temperature scanning, an Open Door email address to curb gossip, a VPN scale-up, new phone lines and chat channels for IT support, gap analysis on computer usage, and much more. We managed to convert 99% of employees to work-from-home client models in about eight days; in previous upheavals to our delivery centers, we were

averaging about 15 days.

In this case, then, the central strategy for conflict resolution was simply quick and decisive planning and execution. In business, very rarely will anything beat that.

We love our work, but to say it's not surrounded by conflict fairly consistently would be inaccurate.

HOW DOES CONFLICT GO VIRAL?

Unfortunately for you as a business leader, conflict can go viral -- spread, in others words -- pretty darn fast. What starts as a simple argument about quality of work or process between two people can involve 25 people by the end of the day (thank you, email and communication platforms). This is [well-documented in research](#).

One parallel here, however uncomfortable it might be for some, is marriage, or long-term relationships. It is fruitless to get involved in a fight in a marriage unless you know what the fight is actually about, although many of us, for years (decades, even!) enter into fights where we are arguing about something completely different. This is perhaps the most normative type of relationship fight. Keep this in mind at work, even though we sometimes draw hard lines between personal events and work events: What is this argument really about? And is it task-oriented conflict (about the work itself) or person-oriented conflict (about the past of the people arguing)? Task-oriented conflict can be resolved much faster; person-oriented conflict will take some time, and face-to-face discussions.

Here's a final wrinkle: would you assume that fully-virtual teams have more conflict or less conflict? Most of us are fully-virtual these days. So, wouldn't we have less conflict because there's less politics and in-person flare ups and it's more about the work itself?

Actually, no. Per research, [virtual teams tend to have more conflict](#). It's for the reason you may have guessed: virtual teams mostly meet on video, or communicate via email or Slack/Teams channel or something. Some of the nuance of face-to-face, in-person communication can be lost in that process.

That's actually in line with an outsourcing and moderation argument of late: some in the industry believe that AI will eventually take over all those services. That might happen someday, but it's nowhere close. And why is that? [AI lacks cultural nuance](#) and conversational nuance, which is crucial for at-scale global moderation. If you have a completely-tech (AI above all) approach to content moderation, you may paradoxically create more conflict in your communities. That's why a human-technology mix is the best bet.

CONFLICT MOVES FAST, SO FOCUS ON CONTAINING IT

There are many parallels between every news story you are seeing during COVID -- flattening curves, etc. -- and how conflict can spiral out of control in an organization. You "flatten" the conflict curve with an approach rooted in the psychological safety of teams, good processes, and quick, decisive execution. Those are the cornerstones of resolving conflicts in global orgs. It's not easy, and we'd never claim we do it perfectly either. But those are the bedrocks to ensure a good atmosphere for your team and business continuity for your clients.

If you have any questions about conflict resolution, disruption, or maintaining business continuity across explosions in UGC and CX needs, we're always happy to talk.



Contact us at sales@conectys.com

Or learn more from our [Blog](#).