

Good morning everybody, Dennis Engelbrecht, Digging Deeper.

A few years back, actually, maybe quite a few years back, working with a client, there was a high level of conflict between two individuals. And I was tasked with trying to break through that and create a better relationship, a better working relationship. And in doing so, I started breaking down what happened in this conflict and why they kept getting into the same cycle. And it's interesting, there is a cycle of conflict that folks get into when they're in this situation. And it really starts with a lot of internal fears and those are oftentimes based on history. So, we may see a certain behavior or a question or a statement from the person we normally have conflict with, and that sends us into thinking about all the history in the context that we bring to the situation. And that reignites the conflict if you will.

And then once we have that, well, maybe we respond in not the best manner and that might escalate the conflict, or we even back away and don't respond and that escalates the conflict because the other person gets frustrated. And then that conflict escalates until it threatens the relationship even further or to a point of no return or a real failure in what we're trying to accomplish. And when we get it high enough, the stakes are high enough, we usually back off and go into some form of detente, which you might remember from the Cold War. And if you think about the Cold War, that's kind of how it happened. You have this inner distrust, an incident happens, and it cycles up like the Cuban Missile Crisis, and then it gets so damaging or potential damaging that we back off and we go back to the old norm. But we haven't solved the problem. We've only deescalated or abandoned the immediate conflict. And then we sort of make up, but we haven't solved the problem.

So, that's really what creates this cycle of recurring conflict that tends to happen. So now how do you change that? Well, the change actually has to happen at the earliest point. It can change at any point in the conflict, but eventually, you have to be able to engage, to work through some productive conflict. But before you get there, you also have to change your context. Again, the context is a situation arises, I apply my context, and then I respond in a negative way that may escalate the conflict. Well, instead of applying that context, I have to consciously try to stay in the moment. All right, how about if I just focus on this conflict, this situation, and not get caught up on what happened the last time or how it went before, and now we actually work through something productive and come to a acceptable conclusion and a positive conclusion, hopefully, for the organization?

So, you have to make that work and you have to make it work repeatedly by the way. Just because you did it once doesn't mean it's going to work the next time because you still have all that context, you still have all that history and you have all those fears from where you went before. Now, three minutes here, I make it sound like it's easy. It is not easy, and it could take months and it could take years. So, where you have that cycle of conflict, get together with the other party, try to make sure that each of you understand what you really want in the end out of the relationship, and then just go to work. And go to work issue by issue until you can come to a new norm and a more open and relaxed relationship. Again, try to break that cycle of conflict.

Dennis Engelbrecht, Digging Deeper.