

Using constructive conflict to leverage growth at an innovative textile company

brrr° is a leader in the emergent cooling textile industry. Their multi-national team is based in Atlanta with remote offices in Taiwan and Shanghai.

Mary-Cathryn Kolb, who previously held senior positions at Spanx, Seven Jeans, TOMS Shoes and Von Dutch, had a vision of becoming an entrepreneur and global leader in innovative textiles. In 2014 she founded and became CEO of brrr° which is now a brand leader in cooling fabrics. brrr°'s scientifically lab tested "Triple Chill Effect" combines natural cooling minerals, active wicking and rapid drying that is used by many well-known retailers to manufacture state-of-the-art business clothing, casual clothing, athletic apparel, denim, uniforms, sheets, and other products.

brrr°'s workforce is a growing 21-person multi-national (three nationalities) team and is geographically dispersed with a home office in Atlanta and two site offices in Asia (Taiwan and Shanghai). Team members speak English and/or Chinese.

Business Challenges

- Improve internal collaborative capabilities to support a rapid growth of manufacturing partnerships

Company Profile

The textile market is evolving quickly with a trend toward fabrics that address climate change, sustainability, and comfort. As an ingredient brand, brrr° uses cutting-edge technology to create hundreds of cooling fabrics that are marketed and then co-branded with well-known clothing manufacturers. For example, Tommy Bahama sells a line of polos that touts its use of brrr° 's Triple Chill Effect that will keep you "cool and comfortable all day long".

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brrr° had positioned itself for rapid growth, which means the company's executive team had to address numerous strategic issues. One key issue was the need to improve their internal collaborative capabilities (marketing, sales, finance, operations) to best support a rapid growth of partnerships.

While the brrr° team worked well together, rapid growth increased uncertainty and created a demand for innovative solutions. This meant that brrr° needed to keep an eye out for destructive conflict that could negatively impact morale and employee relationships.

To capitalize on the opportunities ahead, CEO Kolb and VP of Operations and Product Development, Courtney Cruzan, knew that they needed to take advantage of team members' valuable, but differing, perspectives. Naturally, disparate views create conflict, but Kolb and Cruzan knew that the different views could be managed in a positive and constructive way.

Solution

To accommodate the team's busy schedule and time zone differences, Cruzan hired a management consultant to offer a one-hour virtual conflict management development workshop. In preparation for the workshop, Cruzan and the management consultant discussed the perceived organizational issues and the desired outcome from the engagement. As a result of their discussion, they decided to administer the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI®) so that each team member could learn about their conflict-handling preferences (competing, avoiding, accommodating, compromising, and collaborating). Then, they'd determine how those preferences were impacting their internal teamwork and external partnerships.

Fifteen members from the Atlanta and Taiwan offices attended the session, including the CEO, executive team, and various other organization members. All participants completed a TKI assessment (either in their native English or Chinese) before the workshop began. Additionally, Cruzan and the team discussed the purpose and expected outcomes for the conflict management workshop. The short, one-hour workshop allowed the participants to interpret their TKI conflict-handling profiles including their individual profile, the Atlanta team profile, the Taiwanese team profile, and the combined brrr° team profile. To increase their conflict management literacy and adeptness, they learned the core concepts about organizational conflict and discussed strategies for improving their teams' conflict-handling behaviors.

During the workshop, team members said that poor conflict management at brrr° resulted in undue stress, poor working relationships, and decreased morale. On the other hand, when conflict was managed well within their teams they observed better decision making, increased innovation, and more cohesive teams. Naturally, all agreed that they would like to see less of the former and more of the latter.

Solution

- One-hour virtual team conflict-handling workshop based on the TKI® assessment with 15 members from Atlanta and Taiwan offices
- Focus on developing conflict literacy, when and how to best approach conflict
- Interpret team and individual conflict-handling profiles
- Identify effects of poorly managed and well managed conflict
- Learn to manage task, interpersonal, and process conflict

Additionally, the participants learned to differentiate task conflict, process conflict, and interpersonal conflict. More importantly, they learned how task conflict can be used to attain organizational goals and why process and interpersonal conflict should be minimized. After learning how to best match the five TKI conflict modes to various situations, the participants focused on opportunities for maximizing the collaboration mode and ways to build collaboration skills within brrr° teams and between brrr° and external partners.

Results

Subsequent to the workshop, Cruzan wanted to leverage brrr°'s workshop learning through a post-workshop "share session" (open round table discussion) where team members reflected on their conflict-handling profiles. To do this, she used questions provided by the management consultant to discuss how the company might improve their conflict-handling skills (see Appendix A).

The following are some of the highlights from the participants' discussion about self-awareness, team interactions, and communication with external stakeholders.

Self-Awareness

The conflict management workshop allowed team members to become aware of their conflict-handling preferences and the impact that their behaviors were having on others. The literacy they developed together with a better understanding of conflict management allowed them step back and observe how conflict might be contributing to and detracting from their team and organizational goals. Evaluating the results of the workshop, Cruzan said that several team members had valuable insights after learning about their individual and team conflict-handling profiles.

In particular, one junior support member said, "I ranked high/overusing in avoiding, simply because I am not 100% confident in my role and understanding of what I contribute to the company."

Results

- Increased self-awareness of potential underuse and overuse of the five conflict-handling modes
- Team discussions about better use of the collaboration mode
- Improved communication with potential partners



This observation was not only useful for the team member but was important for more senior managers who may need to clarify roles and provide feedback to junior members about their important contributions to the organization's mission. Such conversations can increase employees' intrinsic motivation and mitigate unproductive conflict.

Cruzan also noted that the workshop surfaced differences between a senior manager's self-scored TKI profile and the other members' views of her conflict-handling preferences. Specifically, one senior manager had scored herself highest on the more assertive conflict-handling modes: compromising (75th percentile), collaboration (74th percentile), and competing (69th percentile). She scored lowest on the less assertive modes: accommodating (30th percentile) and avoiding (12th percentile).

In the team share session, team members agreed that she used a more assertive conflict-handling approach and discussed the pros and cons of using the compromising mode compared to collaborating and competing. Together, the team was able to identify and provide feedback on the various modes used during different stages of the decision-making process and the impact those approaches had on the other team members. This allowed the senior manager to be more thoughtful about her conflict-handling approach for important partnership decisions. It also set the stage for continuing team discussions about the use of conflict for improving corporate decisions.

One last example of self-awareness on this team was one manager who scored high on avoiding and reflected on her profile, "I never thought I avoided situations, so I am trying to be more aware of times that I might be avoiding and adjust accordingly."

In short, because of the conflict management workshop, team members better understood the various conflict-handling modes, were able to reflect on their particular profile and default behaviors, provide one another feedback on the impact of their approaches, and adapt their behavior for better business decisions.

Team Considerations

In addition to members' reflections on their own conflict-handling styles, the team discussed how conflict enhanced or detracted from their team performance. One junior support team member said, "I would like more team-based work and reflection work, instead of 'hey, do this type of work'." Others recognized that poor communication and inefficient information sharing interfered with good collaboration and increased ineffective organizational conflict. These employees knew that success at brrr° required well-honed collaborative efforts within and among their various teams. For example, the product development team needed to collaborate well with the sales team and with the Taiwan team to effectively increase their partnerships.

Finally, during their share session some team members said that they had noticed some micro-managing. However, after the conflict-management workshop they had noticed more attempts to collaborate among team members. One member was delighted and said, "I've seen less micro-managing around here and much more collaboration and that's awesome!"

External Constituents

As mentioned earlier, collaboration is critical for building effective partnerships. Cruzan noted that the workshop had allowed them to improve their communication skills with potential partners that are critical to their multi-country growth trajectory.

In summary, conflict management between the Atlanta and Taiwanese team improved as they worked together better to set common goals and give each other thoughtful feedback and suggestions. This reduced unproductive conflict and allowed them to negotiate different perspectives more successfully. Often, Cruzan noted, collaboration is more challenging because of the tendency in Asian cultures to avoid conflict. Nevertheless, brrr° has been better able to acknowledge these cultural differences and talk about ways they can adjust their interactions accordingly after the conflict management workshop using the TKI framework.

APPENDIX A

REFLECTIONS FOR CONFLICT MANAGEMENT WORKSHOP

Here are a set of reflection questions that can be used after a team has engaged in a TKI team conflict management workshop. The questions are organized into three categories: self-awareness, team considerations, and external constituents.

Self-Awareness

People are often unaware of their conflict-handling preferences or the many options they have for managing differences. The TKI assessment introduces a language for describing the five conflict modes and explains the best approach for dealing with various situations that employees might face in the workplace. Once employees complete the TKI, they are able to identify possible overuse and underuse of the five modes and how the use of each mode might impact their coworkers.

The following questions can surface a discussion about self-awareness.

1. Now that you've received information about your conflict-handling preferences, what have you noticed when engaging with team members about conflicting ideas, opinions, or perspectives?
2. Have you noticed that you might be overusing or underusing a particular mode?
3. Have you tried to alter your approach? For example are you experimenting with using different approaches that might be best for the situation? Are you working on a new skill to improve your ability to manage conflict such as active listening, speaking up to express your point of view, or integrating different perspectives?

Team Considerations

Once organizational members have mastered the basics of the TKI framework, they are better able to engage in important team conversations about conflict management and its contribution to their organization's bottom line. Armed with a vocabulary about conflict as well as the consequences of the various approaches, team members can provide feedback to one another with a goal of using their differences to optimize performance. These are the types of questions that employees can use to discuss team dynamics:

4. What have you noticed about how your team interacts when they encounter conflicting concerns, equities, or perspectives? What drives the interaction? The type of task? The leader? Particular team members?
5. Have you noticed what type of conflict occurs when you have differences? Personality conflict? Process conflict? Task conflict?
 - a. If it's a personality conflict, what strategies do/can you use to get focused on the task? (Self-monitoring, peer support, leader support?)
 - b. If it's process conflict, have you made sure that the process has been spelled out? Is there a clear goal? Are timelines clear? Is the decision process clear?
 - c. Are you actively managing task conflict? Have you set ground rules for your discussions? Do you make sure that everyone has a voice? What happens when things aren't going well? Does someone intervene to get things on track?
6. What are the team's strengths in constructive conflict management? What do we want to keep doing? Do more of?
7. Where could we improve within and across your organization's team?
8. What goals can you set for yourself or your team?

External Constituents

While it is important to use conflict to improve operations within the company, it is just as important to use those conflict skills to improve relationships with external constituents. These are important questions to discuss regarding your external stakeholders:

9. Have we tried applying our learning with outside constituents? Vendors? Customers? If so, what have we observed?
10. How might we use what we've learned to enhance our external relationships?

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