GOING DEEPER—TEXT-BASED LEARNING
ORGANIZATIONAL STRATEGIES FOR INCREASING CONFLICT COMPETENCY

Here is an opportunity to go a little deeper in exploring how to increase your conflict competency. This can be done alone, or you might invite your team to read the text and then structure a dialogue to find shared meaning and application.

Conflict competency happens not only at the personal level but also within organizational culture. Leaders play a significant role in structuring cultural norms that embrace differences through cognitive diversity. Below are three examples from organizations that demonstrate how constructive conflict became a competency that increased overall performance.

"Dailies"

Ed Catmull is the president of Pixar studios, a division of Disney. He and his team have created a number of blockbuster movies, beginning with the release of *Toy Story* in 1995. Catmull believes their success is due to a set of organizational principles and practices that inform the day-to-day work in the studio. One of those practices is called "dailies." This is an opportunity for unfinished work to be reviewed by peers on a daily basis. The tendency in most organizations is to show work only when it is completed, but Catmull believes the creative process is greatly enhanced when work is shared with peers in its developing stages. In the "dailies" process there are a number of benefits. First, getting feedback on unfinished work increases one's vulnerability and transparency among peers. Second, it liberates risk-taking by being open to different possibilities since the work is still evolving. Lastly, sharing unfinished work enhances collective learning and creativity by using exploratory thinking from diverse perspectives. This makes everyone smarter and often causes others to perform at higher levels of competency in their own work. This might be a useful strategy for problem-solving teams who are exploring solutions to complex dilemmas. As potential solutions are emerging, the problem-solving team invites others outside of their work group to pose questions and challenges.

"The Tenth Man (Person)"

In the introduction of constructive conflict, you learned about Bob Ebeling, an engineer at Morton Thiokol, who urgently tried to convey to his bosses that a temperature change in the rocket booster might cause a serious disaster on the space shuttle *Challenger*. In many ways, Bob played the role of what has been identified as "the tenth man." The problem was his team did not know the value of the tenth man. Bob dissented from what the other engineers were saying and tried to make a case for delaying the launching of the *Challenger*. Had his team known about the tenth man intervention, many lives might have been saved.

The concept of the tenth man originated from a failure in Israeli intelligence during the Yom Kippur War in 1973. The intelligence group called AMAN was tasked with assessing any national threat against Israel. The agencies' overconfidence and the snubbing of gathered data created a blind spot that led to a surprise attack by a number of Arab nations. Right after the war, the government created

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the "Agranat commission" to determine what might reduce the chance of any future surprise attack. The commission made a number of recommendations, and one of the most interesting was the "tenth man intervention." According to William Kaplan (2017) in his book *Why Dissent Matters*, the role of "the tenth man is to be the devil's advocate" (p. xi). When nine team members agree, it becomes the tenth man's task to challenge the status quo, question assumptions, and offer a "fresh perspective" on what everyone on the team was agreeing to without the fear of repercussion. Kaplan believes that the tenth man is not a panacea and suggests it may be important to have "an organizational structure that encourages all ranks to be critical, to cast doubt, to reexamine basic assumptions, to get outside the framework" (p. 33). In what ways does your organization or team create room for a tenth man (person)? Is there liberty to express dissent or contrary views on your team? In order to address organizational blind spots, it may be more important than ever to structure roles and responsibilities that challenge the current status quo or the potential of groupthink.

"Braintrust"

Ed Catmull of Pixar also believes the sign of a healthy culture is when freedom exists to share perspectives and differences with candor. When candor is not present in an organization, it often leads to dysfunctional peer interactions. He believes it is the leaders' responsibility to create safe structures where honest feedback can be utilized to increase performance and decrease mediocrity. One of the structures used at Pixar is Braintrust. This happens every few months with, project leaders invited to share challenges and difficulties with a group of colleagues. Catmull has learned that when leaders receive candid feedback, it moves collaborative work to higher performance levels. The reason feedback is important is that complex projects often leave leaders feeling lost or confused in determining the best course of action. When organizations give time for candid feedback, this process messages accountability, where everyone has a responsibility for the success of others. What makes Pixar's Braintrust different from general feedback is that it has no authority. The leader has the freedom to accept or reject suggestions. And, when feedback isn't positive, Catmull (2014) says in a *Fast Company* article, it reminds the person that "you are not your idea, and if you identify too closely with your ideas, you will take offense when challenged." The Braintrust process works only when the person is open to receiving candid feedback. That means there has to be enough psychological safety in the culture to make it work. Catmull believes anyone can use this process to get smarter. All it takes is pulling together the right people who will push your thinking by putting lots of candid feedback and solutions on the table.

When organizational cultures draw on differences and disagreements, they become smarter and make better overall decisions. This often requires an openness to hearing and considering viewpoints contrary to one's own. The above examples remind us that leaders can create conditions where differences are expressed without judgment, candor is present and not personalized, and vulnerability is welcomed without loss of credibility. The closing quote captures well the importance of conflict competence in organizations that want to become beacons for a future that is emerging and often unpredictable:

> Good decision making is enhanced by putting together different pieces of information gathered from a wide variety of sources, in a setting where team members are truly

encouraged to speak and where new information – information that might change everything – is welcomed, not suppressed. Disagreement, instead of being rejected as argumentative, should be encouraged and embraced. "Open door" polices are meaningless unless accompanied by an open mind and a real curiosity about how others see things, and skepticism about everything, especially received wisdom (p. 302).

—William Kaplan (2017)