Real communication works.... even when there is conflict

We all have been there. With our overflowing schedules and enormous amounts of information we take in, or is only one mouse click or swipe away, we sometimes assume too much, form our own opinion on the opinion of others and only half listen. This is how we function, how we spend our time and how we coexist with others. What we don't always realise it can also be fertile ground for conflict in our teams.

In this article, executive coach and HR thought leader Carolien van Bremen reflects on how the overwhelm of information today distracts us from thinking about and working on the real issues our teams and boardrooms face.

Thinking about People Trends and what is the latest or the best I cannot help but feeling slightly uncomfortable.
It seems with all information flows like speakers, books, visual and audio clips, posts and above all opinions it is a very crowded arena. The more I can or *must* take in to stay on the ball, to me it sometimes feels the less space there is for truly forming an opinion, hear myself think, share my own expertise and most importantly see what is there.

In my practice I get asked to join management 'away days', board meetings, senior or executive team meetings and annual staff events. There are all important get togethers, where all functions shape the future through their strategy, align their vision, are held accountable for results achieved and deliver on their key performance indicators. Those are all 'normal' words and definitions of things that happen in any organisational environment, no matter if that organisation is driven by profit, ideology or government.

Now, let's look behind those titles, events and management speak; who is actually driving it? Indeed, people are the drivers behind any organisational system, with all successes and failures. I will not go into what will happen to organisations if a non-human workforce takes over, or if designed and programmed technology is in charge, so let us assume all organisational dealings are the work of people.

Looking at people and dealings at the work floor, in board rooms and in management teams, managing and leading is very much people work. Where people work, all results, all efforts and all accomplishments and disappointments are the result of people working together.

Going back to how I started this article and what happens in my daily practice, people appear to have a love, or just cannot help themselves, for overcomplicating things. Over-informing, over importance of self or 'it', and sometimes getting so tangled up in defending ground or principles, that they need to rely on an external advisor, mediator or coach to refocus and see the clearer picture again. Often, management teams ask me to work according to a specific methodology, follow the '10 golden rules' of the latest guru on so-and-so, use a certain psychometric test or plainly expect the external person to solve their issues.

There is nothing as complicated and as simple as conflict in a management team. Complicated because we're dealing with people. And why I say it is simple is for the exact same reason. People.

Conflict starts where listening ends. Conflict festers when people do not give. Conflict ends when understanding grows. It sounds do-able, right? I do not think any conflict is beyond repair, as long as we follow the same few ground rules:

1) Do I need to be right?
By asking yourself that question, generally the answer can be no. We confuse being right with other things. We want to be listened to, we want to convey our message, we need to feel we matter, but usually that is enough. Try it! And... it will be no surprise this question can be asked and answered outside the work environment also.

2) Is what I want to say that important?
Ask yourself again, do I absolutely need to say what I want to say, or can the conversation do without? We have an incredible need to think our contributions are vital for a conversation. Sometimes they are, mostly they are not. Focussing on what you want to say, share or add not only disturbs the other's thinking process. It makes you focus only on when you can interject the conversation and therefore stops your unconditional listening. The other party will notice, for sure. By waiting, pausing and just listening you give people that are naturally introverted an opportunity to speak. If your contribution is key, share it. If it isn't, it is just not that important. A variation on this is to only give advice when asked, or to only add what other may have missed. Don't speak for the sake of hearing your own voice. Rather than putting your view, ask what the other thinks about this.

3) Step in their shoes
Looking at conflict in teams, all players have a specific role to play, may have other battles going on in the background, may have a different agenda from you. It all makes it very difficult to look at the situation from their perspective. It may help to try and see things from the others' perspective. What are their drivers, how would you feel wearing their shoes, what do they have going on in their lives when they are not battling in the management team? See the human behind the crossed arms and the head shaking in disagreement. Also, if you struggle to do this, it may be enough to just stay in non-judgment and do not assume you know how it feels to be that person because you don't know what happened that day/morning, prior to the meeting. As Brené Brown would put it to 'assume positive intent' or in Carl Rogers' concept it would be having an 'unconditional positive regard'.

4) Offer help
As contradicting as it sounds, when you have listened carefully, have tried to see the situation from their side and have bitten your tongue a few times to not speak for the sake of speaking, and you still feel you're not moving, you can always offer help. You're colleagues, fellow MT members and.... indeed both/ all humans! Offer help, as small as keeping the door open, holding the elevator, getting the coffee this time can also open the door to a breakthrough in a conflict situation. Simple, right?

I do realise by simplifying the world I don't do justice to all complexities around human relations, workplace conflicts, toxic culture, dysfunctional teams, bad behaviour and bad response to bad behaviour. However, before we jump to complex solutioning, my suggestion is always to go back to the 'normality' of things and look at being clear in our communication, asking inquisitive questions and giving genuine attention to the people around us. This worked when we were playing in the sandbox, and it should be no different in our executive meeting rooms.

The attraction of working like this and sometimes giving these modest pieces of advice is that I can stay close to me, to what my values are and to what makes me tick. I do not want to only rely on trends, trust jargon or hide behind management models, I believe it is the constant realisation of that we are all humans and ultimately all we *should* want is to treat others as they would wish to be treated. With respect, undivided attention, kindness and empathy.

This article will be also be published at www.octoberadvice.co.uk.