

## How can conflict be healthy? By Davon Cook

A significant part of our work at Ag Progress is helping family business members manage conflict. Notice I did not use the term *conflict resolution* because I believe in many cases conflict may not be “resolved”, that is, that the problem magically goes away forever. What we hope to do is *manage* conflict in a productive way. In his book [“The Five Dysfunctions of a Team,”](#) Patrick Lencioni goes even further and advocates for “healthy conflict” in a business or organization.

What is healthy conflict? It is discussion on differences of opinion in productive, idea-based discussion, and *not* in destructive, interpersonal terms. The purpose is to produce the best possible solution, even if that solution involves heated debate. Teams that avoid discussing differences of opinion on ideas often do so in order to avoid hurting other people’s feelings. But ironically, when team members don’t openly debate and disagree on important ideas, they often turn to back-channel personal attacks, which are far nastier. You have to be able to discuss, debate, and disagree in a professional, productive manner. Sweeping it under the rug doesn’t work.

In an [Ernst & Young survey](#) of 525 of the world’s most successful family businesses, 45% reported existence of what would fit under Lencioni’s definition of dysfunctional family conflict. I suspect it is inevitable that, sooner or later, there will be difference of opinion and conflict on some topic. Being able to discuss it calmly, maturely, and with sincere intention of solving the problem *together* is a core requirement for long term success. It’s often not easy to achieve, but certainly worth the effort.

A good place to start is educating all the stakeholders about their responsibilities as an owner, manager, and/or family member—as well as what they are *not* responsible for. Learning to participate in an ownership meeting with a professional agenda and knowledgeable discussions sets an expectation that differences of opinion will be discussed calmly and with facts, and not simply with emotion. Ditto for management meetings. And providing a specific forum to discuss concerns as family members, which may indeed be more emotional, validates that those conversations are important also.

One thing I observe with certainty: pretending a disagreement doesn’t exist rarely works. Strive to manage it and embrace it as healthy conflict.