Conventional thinking says that conflict is bad for teamwork and should be kept out of the office, but putting individuals in a conflictual state of mind can enhance their creativity.

The workplace can be full of conflict. Groups of people, driven by different goals inevitably find themselves at cross purposes and disagreements flare up, regardless of industry or country. Add personality clashes and different personal values into the mix and the firm can become a crucible of professional rivalry. Sometimes it can become destructive to the firm as a whole.

For this very reason, managers are told to downplay conflict as much as possible and to foster and facilitate team harmony because clashes are detrimental to trust, collaboration and creativity.

But what if such conflict could be harnessed by managers to enhance performance?

In our paper The Combined Effect of Relationship Conflict and the Relational Self on Creativity, my doctoral student Eun Jin Jung and I, found that helping people to see themselves in relation to others, especially during episodes of conflict, made them crystallise their goals and strive to achieve them by more creative means. This is because most people want harmonious relationships with those around them and when obstacles to achieving that harmony appear, they become more determined to overcome them.

Many of us define our “self” in relation to those around us, for example, “me when I’m with my partner or close friends” and “me at work with my colleagues”. Some are more relational than others. For example, those of East Asian origin where social interdependence is strong are more relational than those from Western backgrounds that emphasise autonomy, while women across cultures tend to be more relational than men.

This matters because relational selves consider close others’ outcomes as their own and greatly value their responsiveness to others’ needs. This desire for harmony can be a powerful tool for enhancing work outcomes and as we discovered in our paper, even less relational individuals can be motivated by conflict.

Putting conflict to work

In our study, we asked 113 Americans in two groups to read a short story on a situation that put them in the shoes of a relational individual and another in an independent condition. The two groups then had to recall a harmonious and a conflictual relationship situation they’d felt in the past.

They were then asked to write down their thoughts and feelings of those particular situations, which we examined for depth and detail of their experience to
determine their persistence to overcome the
classic conflict.

Afterwards, participants completed a creativity test
called the Remote Associates Test, which measures
the ability to identify associations between normally
unrelated words (for example, elephant, lapse,
vivid; Answer: memory) so we could see how
putting them in this frame of mind impacted their
creative ability.

We found that relationship conflict has the positive
effect of boosting creativity for relational people,
because it motivates them to think harder to find
solutions for the conflict. We also went on to study a
Korean sample in which we were able to replicate
our findings.

We also investigated what sparks creativity in more
independent individuals. What we found in this case
was that a process conflict (i.e. controversy in a
group about how a task should be completed or how
resources are allocated), rather than a relationship
conflict, was equally effective at making them
persistent and hence creative.

Making conflict work for you

For managers, this means that the concept of
removing all conflict from your teams should be
taken with a pinch of salt. But this isn’t a call to
create a conflictual environment for your employees
to work in. Remember that this is about putting
people in a frame of mind that makes them aware of
the differences between themselves and others.

In a practical setting, this could be applied by using
instances of conflict or past conflict to invoke the
relational self in the individuals involved or to help
them be mindful of interpersonal incompatibility to
activate relational thinking. For the more
independent individuals, perhaps managers should
think twice about intervening to remove obstacles
that might make the individual facing them work
harder to overcome them. Setting people’s minds to
think about their place in their families can also be
an easy way to create a natural conflict within
between the self at home and the self at work to fire
up an ambition to maintain harmony in both settings.

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Organizational Behavior and Human Decision
Processes.

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