



Controlling Conflict and Changing Culture

A community foundation seeks to be as good on the inside as it is on the outside.



The following story was shared by John Vercelli, director of corporate programs at The Coaches Training Institute (CTI).

CLIENT>>

The Marin Community Foundation (MCF), a large, California-based philanthropy with 44 employees

PROBLEM>>

MCF wanted to move toward a more “intrapreneurial” culture that was less process-driven and more outcomes-focused. Many employees avoided having difficult conversations with colleagues, so MCF also wanted to increase employee communication.

DIAGNOSIS>>

The foundation’s culture was initially driven by consensus, process, and problem identification. Leaders wanted to develop a culture that fostered open, honest, and productive communication resulting in collaboration and innovation.

METHODS>>

In 2008 MCF began to implement the culture change. First, the foundation formed a culture change committee with members from a variety of organization functions and employee levels. The committee communicated the initiative’s desired characteristics, behaviors, and processes; senior leaders endorsed these recommendations.

Employees reviewed the committee’s findings and provided feedback at an all-staff retreat. The foundation then hired CTI to facilitate coaching and deliver training organization-wide. CTI conducted initial training with MCF’s supervisors, at which time the leaders agreed to model a set of behavior commitments or “coaching principles.” These principles included information on how to communicate effectively, make difficult decisions, and foster engagement and innovation. CTI then taught the coaching principles to all employees through a series of training workshops.

After initial training, CTI followed up with the culture change committee, facilitating several discussions to ensure that top executives were effectively modeling the new behavior. To reinforce learning, CTI also presented “booster shot” all-staff training sessions at six- and nine-month intervals, as well as targeted one-on-one coaching. Leaders integrated the culture change into small group meetings and performance reviews.

RESULTS>>

MCF conducted a survey to assess the change’s impact. Employee relationships improved significantly, and supervisors began to better support employees to find their own solutions. Employees now participate in meetings with energy and passion. They speak up and take responsibility; proactively work together to overcome interpersonal conflict; and seek clear understanding of roles, responsibilities, and authority.



LESSON LEARNED:

For culture change to be successful, the C-suite must first set the vision, encourage senior leaders to set the example, and then communicate the vision to the rest of the organization. Once employees begin to overcome interpersonal conflict, the culture change is self-sustaining because it feels right to get along.