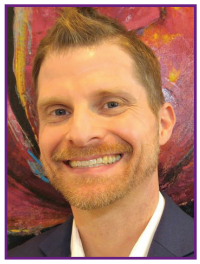

Reframing the Conversation: Embracing Workplace Conflict Through a DEIB Lens

| By Mary Fosten-English, LMFT, CEAP and
Bryan McNutt, Ph.D., LMFT, CEAP

While the experience of interpersonal conflict at work is not new, managers and EA professionals face increasingly complex and dynamic situations that influence how workplace conflict emerges, how conflict is interpreted, and how conflict is managed. Navigating workplace conflicts is often a part of the job that managers and employee assistance professionals report as a standard yet considerably challenging phenomenon in the workplace. In addition, organizational leaders are confronted with the difficult task of guiding their teams through rapidly changing macro-sociocultural factors that can play out as unavoidable dynamics within the workplace, such as critical matters of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB). This article discusses the intersectionality between workplace culture and conflict while also introducing the benefits of using a DEIB lens in navigating workplace conflict through the application of the EMBRACE© model of mediation.

The Evolving Experiences of Workplace Conflict

Over the past few decades, the workplace has become increasingly diversified, inevitably introducing the potential for interpersonal conflict and disagreement due to the convergence of differing worldviews, perspectives, beliefs, and lived experiences. Some challenging dimensions include interpersonal skill deficiencies in establishing relational neutrality, building adequate trust and rapport, and utilizing vocabulary and communication strategies to address personal differences and power inequities. Additional examples include experiences in which employees and coworkers may feel misunderstood, not included, valued, or marginalized in the workplace due to implicit bias and assumptions about one's own (or another's) work role and position of authority. Conflict that is not managed effectively impacts team performance and may contribute to a stifled sense of belonging, inclusion, and lack

of meaningful engagement at work. Managers are challenged with critical inflection points to address emerging team conflicts in a timely and effective manner, which can promote a sense of resolution and reconciliation that result in better understanding and trust between employees.

Culture and Conflict in the Workplace

Across organizations, employers are faced with increased demands to enhance relevant experiences of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging to retain current employees, attract new talent, and nurture a more meaningful and satisfying work experience. However, many leaders are discovering the inherent challenges of preexisting workplace cultures that resist such aspirational values and organizational changes.

In a recent survey of over 5,700 employers and employees, which spanned multiple industries in Australia, Canada, Singapore, the United Kingdom, and the United States, respondents revealed that a majority of those who left their job in the past six months did not feel valued by their organization (54%) or manager (52%), or they lacked a sense of belonging (51%) (De Smet et al., 2021).

Recent meta-analytic research exploring the experience of workplace conflict and incivility has revealed the inherent systemic nature of workplace conflict, which may be reinforced by harmful organizational cultures and structures of power (Chris et al., 2022). Contextual factors, such as an organization's culture, are more impactful than individual differences in predicting workplace conflict (Yao et al., 2021). Often, workplace conflict extends beyond a purely interpersonal level of conflict that is made up of a few "bad apples" who may instigate conflict. Instead, it involves the entire cultural system of a workplace. Harmful workplace cultures can perpetuate implicit beliefs and pervasive habits of behavior that undermine interpersonal trust, reinforce bias and prejudice, and contaminate collaborative relations.

For example, research has explored workplace cultures that function through heteronormative masculine-dominant styles of relating, which may promote and reward interpersonal traits such as hyper-competition, ruthlessness, stamina and emotional toughness (Berdahl et al., 2018). Other common workplace cultures that perpetuate systemic conflict and work against DEIB values include perfectionistic, power-hoarding and individualistic cultures (McNutt, 2021). These types of cultures are often implicated in marginalizing employees who do not reflect aspects of the dominant cultural schema of a workplace. In addition, Somaraju et al. (2014) also reveal how workplace conflict is perpetuated by organizational cultures that enable unfair workloads and neglect to provide supportive resources for employees.

The Critical Role of Managers and EAPs in Navigating Workplace Conflict

Given the inherent systemic dimension of workplace conflict, it is worth considering how conflict resolution solutions need to extend beyond individually-focused employee interventions to include more dynamic organizational factors, such as addressing the workplace cultures within work groups, teams, units, and departments. Organizational leaders and managers are in unique positions to contribute to shaping a productive workplace culture, cultivate DEIB sensitivity, and mitigate emerging conflict. We know managers often set the tone for the subculture within a work team or unit. In addition, frontline supervisors are frequently in positions to identify early indicators of team conflict and to initiate constructive supervisory engagement within the workgroup.

Likewise, EAPs have a critical role in providing management consultancy support to help supervisors and leaders navigate the dynamics of workplace conflict through a DEIB lens. Although research primarily supports the correlation between diversity and increased conflicts, there is limited research on the positive benefits of diversity in dealing with workplace conflict. Roberge and VanDick (2010) did an extensive literature review and analysis of when and how diversity can improve work performance and be effective in managing conflict. They propose a psycho-social, multi-level model that examines how individual and collective identity combined with psychological safety activates mechanisms that lead to positive outcomes by highlighting diversity. The **E**quity, **M**ediation (focusing on) **B**elonging, **R**acism (and) **A**ccountability **C**onversations in **E**ducational Institutions or EMBRACE© model exemplifies how to view conflict through a DEIB lens. In the following section, we will review the application of the EMBRACE© model within the context of providing management consultation support. We believe

the framework of the EMBRACE© model can serve as a practical strategy to help managers feel more equipped to navigate experiences of team conflict while remaining grounded in DEIB-oriented values.

Incorporating the EMBRACE© model within Management Consultation

Building on the premise that diversity increases conflict, Roberg and VanDick (2010) insert that it is important to look at the type of conflict to determine any positive outcomes of diversity in the workplace, especially regarding how it impacts conflict. They identify three types of conflicts that can occur in diverse groups: (1) task conflict, (2) socio-emotional conflict and (3) value conflict. *Task conflict* is disagreement about the content of the task. *Socio-emotional conflict* is based on relationships and negative feelings about individuals in relationships with each other (Jehn, 1995). *Value conflict* is based on what individuals value in terms of the process and the outcome (Gebert, Boerner, & Kearney, 2006), and value conflict is typically one of the more challenging types of conflict to mediate because it requires a deeper style of communication that builds trust and psychological safety. Managers and EA professionals who are skillful at using deeper styles of communication that include empathy and understand how differences in diversity generate different types of conflict will be more effective in managing conflicts due to differences that arise in each of the three types.

The EMBRACE© approach is introduced here as a different model of mediation/facilitated conversations that can effectively resolve conflicts associated with differences reflective of diversity, racism and other forms of inequity. The word **embrace** is commonly used as a verb, and when used as a verb, it can mean "to accept or support (a belief, theory, or change) willingly and enthusiastically." As a noun, *embrace can be defined as "an act of accepting* or supporting something willingly or enthusiastically." When used in the context of relationships, *embrace* captures how important it is to accept the natural element of conflict (Foston-English, 2021).

EMBRACE® offers some skills and tools for managers and EAs to assist in managing conflicts highlighted by power and inequity differences. Although this model was created for use in educational institutions, its usefulness and applicability extend to corporate organizations and teams, which may also embody similar forms of power structures.

EMBRACE is best used by professionals proficient in either mediation/facilitated conversation skills and/or DEIB (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Belonging) or JEDI (Justice, Equity, Diversity, Inclusion) awareness. Mediation and Facilitated Conversation will be used interchangeably in this article and are the same process. It requires, at minimum, a level of cultural competency and, ideally, cultural humility. Cultural humility includes continued growth and awareness about privilege, leaning into the uncomfortable, and professionally working with individuals in a more culturally responsive way. (Hook et al., 2017). The extensive literature review by Roberge and VanDick (2010) outlines reasons for the effectiveness and use of "multi-level" interventions when working with diverse workforces. Their propositions align with the language and concepts of cultural competence and having cultural humility. These include understanding the individual identity of diverse employees and taking time to understand what, when and how collective identity prohibits deeper communication styles and trust. EMBRACE is based on these same core concepts and a multi-level model of conflict management that uses deeper, trust-building, empathetic communication using a DEIB lens to examine how inequities and power differentials impact conflict. Managers who incorporate these concepts will be more effective in managing conflicts at work.

Asking individuals to examine the role of systemic oppression may result in a keen defensiveness which is destructive to any true conflict mediation. As Robin DiAngelo stresses in her book *White Fragility*, a cultural norm exists that privileges silence around structural inequities which creates overwhelming discomfort for anybody who benefits from that system, yet "the key to moving forward is what we do with our discomfort." (Diangelo, 2018). A fundamental aspect of EMBRACE© is attending to this discomfort through normalizing conflict; that is, we must stress that conflict is a stage of any relationship. Indeed, systemic conflicts abound in a society with various forms of intersecting oppressions, so when we neglect to acknowledge the ever-present conflicts that exist, our effectiveness in resolving these conflicts is diminished, and the process of reparative mediation is forestalled.

When EA professionals are consulted to help managers with conflictual work relationships, EMBRACE© suggests assessing how differences, power and inequity are seen as part of the work culture and how these contribute to the conflict. EMBRACE© provides strong scaffolding with hands-on techniques to support managers and EA professionals in facilitating difficult but powerful conversations within a culturally responsive context.

The initial meeting with employees who might benefit from using EMBRACE© techniques and vocabulary requires trust and empathy-building skills with both marginalized employees and employees with perceived power. For example, asking about "collective paranoia" (Kramer, 1994) and "healthy paranoia" (Grier & Cobbs, 1968) can elicit empathetic conversations necessary for building trust with marginalized employees. For example, asking employees with power if they have an awareness of how their power might play a part in the conflict creates empathy with them. It is also important to assess if there is a difference in who values individual self-identity more, who values collective group identity more, and if individual identity is "lost" by taking on the group identity.

Tips for Managers and EA professionals who utilize an EMBRACE approach:

- Familiarize yourself with different theories of change models
- Become knowledgeable about the benefits of mediation/facilitated conversation and be able to determine when it's most effective
- Be comfortable with setting the stage for how and why power inequalities contribute to conflict
- Model communication that fosters empathy and acceptance
- Introduce and use relevant DEIB vocabulary and definitions
- Explain how EMBRACE is an opportunity to grow in awareness of biases
- Encourage self-reflection after each meeting
- Be attentive to own body's reactions to what's seen and heard by participants and be attentive to participant's body language
- Inquire about biased thoughts, beliefs and behaviors
- Be knowledgeable about the mandated reporting process and resources/referrals

Management Consultation Vignette

Ellen, a 55-year-old white, cisgender heterosexual female supervisor, requests to meet with the organization's EAP after receiving a complaint from one of her direct reports. The supervisor oversees a team of five very diverse employees, including a 32-year-old Latinx queer-identified employee of 6 months, Rigoberto. The employee reported feeling undermined by another team member, John, a 46-year-old Irish-American cisgender heterosexual male, and senior team member. Although they were hired for the expertise they bring to the team, Rigoberto complained about John not inviting them to lead any projects. Ellen has requested additional guidance about facilitating a constructive conversation between employees to help them better understand each other and de-escalate the tension and negativity impacting the team's performance.

We would like to suggest some recommendations when considering the application of the EMBRACE model within the context of providing management consultation support. Utilizing the example of the previous vignette, here are some suggestions for working with the supervisor, Ellen. As an EA provider, you have an opportunity to:

- Facilitate Ellen's reflection upon the habits of culture within her work team and how diversity is valued
- Assist Ellen with considering how the different habits of work culture may contribute to her employees feeling misunderstood, unseen, not valued or included

- Facilitate Ellen's self-reflection about the implicit biases she may have about her team's experience of conflict (e.g., who she may view as being "right" or "wrong")
- Collaboratively explore with Ellen her awareness of the potential power dynamics that are inherent within the conflict between Rigoberto and John, as well as the influence of her power position in the department
- Assist Ellen with reflecting upon the possible role that each employee's social positionality might have upon their working relationship (e.g., gender roles/norms; perceived authority related to age discrepancy and seniority at the organization; expectations of assuming a position of leadership)
- Encourage Ellen to approach her facilitated conversation with both employees from a relational position that practices curiosity rather than judgment, models genuine listening rather than authoritative directing, and acknowledges her own gaps of understanding about their respective subjective feelings and perceptions

Secondly, it may also be helpful to explore with Ellen how she can encourage Rigoberto and John to:

- Consider how conflict is not a sign of "failure" but rather a normal process of relationships
- Identify the value of the different perspectives they each bring in their approach to the team project (e.g., stimulating new insight and approaches to being creative, efficient, and productive)
- Ask if other differences (i.e., race, ethnicity, sexual identity, etc.) may be contributing to the conflict
- Recognize the complementary strengths both employees offer to the team through their different lengths of tenure with the organization (e.g., the value of institutional knowledge and the value of fresh perspective) and different views about individual self vs. group collective identity
- Demonstrate situational humility during occasions of disagreement while also recognizing the need for each other's expertise to help fill in the gaps in knowledge
- Solicit collaborative input from both employees about what they view as equitable solutions, as well as invite them both to follow up with further collaboration about their performance

Conclusion

When considering the systemic dimensions of workplace experience, EAPs are challenged to consider how the symptoms of workplace conflict emerge from organizational cultures that struggle to adapt to the challenges of engaging a more complex work environment that involves a more diverse and inclusive workforce. These diverse work environments require different ways to view and manage conflicts. The EMBRACE model provides further consideration of reimagining conflict as a relational opportunity for enhanced awareness of oneself and others rather than as a relational experience that is inherently threatening. Rather than avoiding conflict or pushing against it, the EMBRACE model encourages managers to lean into the conflict experience. Doing so also reflects the value of engaging the patterns of conflict within their team culture and learning from the importance of integrating diverse perspectives, convictions, and life experiences into the team culture.

VISIONS, Inc. is a non-profit organization created in 1984 by three Black women and a white Jewish male with the goal of educating individuals about the benefits of multiculturalism and social justice work. Their founding director, Valerie Batts (2015), writes, "True reconciliation can happen, then, only when all parties understand each other in ways that lead to behaving differently. For those with historical and current social, economic, and political power, i.e., United States citizens of European ancestry, White Australians, White South Africans and many others of European descent, reconciliation requires acknowledging the historic and continuing impact of racial privilege as well as working with the "targets" of this power imbalance to effect reconciliation at the personal, interpersonal, institutional, and cultural levels." This chart shows the various ways exclusion and inclusion show up in our society and especially in the workplace.

Types of Oppression	Variable	Historically Included Groups	Historically Excluded Groups
Racism	Race/Color/Ethnicity	White	People of Color (African, Latinx, Asian, Native)
Classism	Socio-Economic Status	Upper, Middle Class	Poor, Working Class
Elitism	Education Level Place in Hierarchy	Formally Educated Faculty, Managers, Exempt	Informally Educated Non-exempt staff, Clerical, Students
Sexism	Gender	Men	Women/ Transgender
Genderism	Gender Identity/Gender Expression	Cisgender, Appearance & Behaviors congruent with the gender binary system	Transgender; Gender non-conforming; Gender queer; Androgynous
Heterosexism	Sexual Orientation	Heterosexuals	Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Pansexual, Asexual, Queer, Questioning
Religious Oppression, Anti-Semitism	Religion	Christian/ Protestant	Muslim, Jewish, Catholic, Agnostic, Hindu, Atheist, Buddhist, Spiritual, LDS, Jehovah's Witness, Pagan
Militarism	Military Status	World War I & II, Gulf War Veterans	Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan Veterans & Pacifists
Ageism Adultism	Age Age	Young Adults Adults	Elders (40+ by law) Children/Minors (17- by law)
Ableism	Physical, Mental, Emotional, Learning Ability	Currently, "Able-Bodied"	Individuals with a physical, mental, emotional or learning disability
Xenophobia	Immigrant Status	U.S. Born	Immigrant
Linguistic Oppression	Language	English	English as a second language; Non-English

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***Mary Foston-English**, LMFT (California and Texas), CEAP is a dual licensed Marriage and Family Therapist currently working part time for 25+ years as an internal employee assistance counselor at Stanford University's Faculty Staff Help Center and as a private practitioner/consultant. She is a long-term EAPA member and uses her certification as a CAMFT certified supervisor to mentor trainees interested in becoming a CEAP. She may be reached at mary@foston-english.com*

***Dr. Bryan McNutt**, PhD, LMFT, CEAP is a Licensed Clinical Psychologist who currently works as an internal employee assistance counselor with the Faculty and Staff Employee Assistance Program at the University of California, San Diego. Dr. McNutt also serves as the president of the EAPA San Diego Chapter. He may be reached at BryanMcnuttphd@gmail.com*