

Human Resources. Recruitment & Training

Improve Productivity Through Elimination of Conative Conflict

By [Frank Reid](#), Executive Vice President, Kolbe Corporation



Bertha is director of information technology at XYZ International Hotel Corp., a multinational hospitality company - and she has a BIG problem.

Over the past several years, Bertha established herself as one of the best team leaders in the company. People liked working for her, and her teams always produced high-quality solutions, delivered on-time and under budget.

But now, in a matter of weeks, everything has changed. One of Bertha's teams was assigned to restructure data management operations at five of the company's primary resort locations. However, for some reason, several of the tasks on this project have come to a screeching halt. The entire project is behind schedule, employee morale is in the tank, and Bertha fears she is at risk of losing her job.

One evening, after all of her employees have gone home for the day, Bertha looks out from her office at the rows of empty cubicles and asks herself, "How did this happen?" But before the question even finishes crossing her mind, she knows the answer - or at least she thinks she does.

The problems started about a month ago, after she recruited two new team leaders - Penelope and Floyd. As she was recruiting for these positions, Bertha reviewed a stack of resumes, interviewed candidates, and had each of them complete assessments for intelligence and personality. She selected Penelope and Floyd to lead the two most critical subcommittees on the project. Both are highly intelligent, well educated, and very experienced. Their personality assessments rate them as extroverts and team players. It seemed only logical that these two leaders should be able to work well together. But that's not what's happening. In fact, after a series of confrontations, Penelope and Floyd can barely speak with one another. Worse yet, earlier today, three members of the task force turned in their letters of resignation.

This afternoon, Bertha met with Floyd and Penelope individually to get to the bottom of the situation.

Floyd gave her an earful: "Penelope never has the information I need. I want to move forward on several projects, but how do we do that without a plan? She's always working on four or five things at a time and she has this devil-may-care attitude about everything. Whenever I ask her for details on a new manufacturing process, she won't give me anything specific. Last week, I decided to list several options on a timeline and drew up a cost-benefit analysis for each one; but she wasn't interested. Penelope says we should just 'throw some ideas up against the wall and see if something sticks.' But that's crazy, and it's dangerous for the company! It's like she never worries about the risks or costs involved in anything. How can we move forward without the right information?"

An hour later, Penelope told Bertha, "I can never get Floyd to start on anything. He's always asking me for more and more information. But that's just a delaying tactic. It's like he's paralyzed and can't move forward. Whenever I bring up a new idea, he's always focusing on what could go wrong or why we can't do it. But I think he's afraid to try anything new or to even take a chance on anything. This is a big project; but Floyd won't work on more than one thing at a time. He's a hard worker, he's really smart, and he's a nice guy. I don't know what it is."

It's at this point that a manager in Bertha's position might conclude that she is dealing with a personality conflict and consider options ranging from employee counselling to reassigning (or even terminating) one or both employees. However, far too often, the problem has nothing to do with personalities and everything to do with the manager's incomplete team-building process. What many managers do not realize is that intelligence and personality comprise only part of the team-building equation.

Three Parts of the Mind

Scientists and philosophers have long believed that the mind consists of three components. Of course, most people are well aware of both the cognitive (intelligence) and affective (emotions) aspects of the mind; however, relatively few are familiar with the conative (instinct) component, which determines how each individual naturally takes action and solves problems.

These three aspects of the mind all play a part in determining who we are and how successful we will be. However, while the affective aspect will drive what we want to do, and the cognitive aspect will determine what we know how to do, it is the conative aspect of the mind that actually determines how we will take action to accomplish a task.

This is why so many "prodigies" and "high performers" in high school go on to mediocre or even disappointing careers, while many "B" students might go on to run Fortune 500 companies or develop the next big medical breakthrough. Our schools teach students to leverage their intelligence without showing them how to leverage their conative (instinctive) strengths. However, smarts and straight-A's don't guarantee professional success. Research at Carnegie Institute of Technology indicates that only 15 percent of your financial success is due to technical knowledge. In truth, regardless of their academic accomplishments, managers (even managers who were not the best students in school) can build highly productive teams and dramatically reduce turnover if they learn how to leverage their own conative strengths and those of their employees.

Human actions can be clustered into four sets of behaviors, or Action Modes®, as they are described by Kathy Kolbe, the leading authority on human instinctive behavior:(1)

- Fact Finder - people who lead with this mode focus on details and facts, often discovering that such information may mean more to them than to others.
- Follow Thru - people who lead with this mode are meticulous at planning and strive to bring order and efficiency. While this is a critical strength for any organization, a relentless need for order can also be stifling for a team.
- Quick Start - people who lead with this mode are motivated by deadlines and crisis-oriented with an affinity toward risk, spontaneity, and flexibility.
- Implementor - people who lead with this mode have a strong sense of three-dimensional form and substance and an ability to deal with the tangible. These are often hands-on, craft-oriented individuals who have an affinity for using high quality tools and models.

All of this is completely distinct from personality and intelligence. Individuals identified as intelligent, learning-impaired, extroverted, introverted, etc. can (and do) exhibit strengths in all four of these modes. For team leaders, the challenge lies in 1) identifying the conative strengths of their employees, 2) knowing how to leverage those strengths, 3) building teams of individuals who exhibit a range of strengths in each mode, and (4) ensuring that team members can appreciate the strengths of their teammates while not being required to work against their own conative strengths.

Penelope and Floyd are in conative conflict, and the problem is being mis-diagnosed as a personality clash. In desperation, Bertha contacts a consultant who is familiar with conation. The consultant has everyone on Bertha's team (including Bertha) complete a conative assessment. Within minutes, the consultant has spotted the problem, and it has little to do with personality.

Floyd is an initiating Follow Thru and Fact Finder. He needs to gather and organize information so that he can design plans and develop complex strategies. He is particularly skilled at conducting in-depth research and then developing charts and graphs to bring things into focus. He also prevents in Quick Start. So, he naturally strives to minimize risk factors and stick with what's worked before - for the good of the organization.

Penelope initiates in Quick Start. She needs to experiment, brainstorm, initiate change, and improvise. She also prevents in Follow Thru and Fact Finder. So, she needs to multi-task, loosen up rigid processes, and create shortcuts through bureaucracy. During the workday, she thrives on interruptions.

Given their conative profiles, it's not at all surprising that Floyd and Penelope would be in conflict. If the team is to be successful, Floyd and Penelope must learn to understand and rely on one another's conative strengths, or they must be replaced with managers who are willing to do so. Fortunately, the consultant finds that Mary, one of the members of the team, is a conative "Facilitator" - who neither initiates nor prevents in any Mode. Facilitators are very skilled at mediating

because they have an innate talent for understanding all sides and can work with people who initiate and prevent in a variety of Modes. Facilitators are often the most highly valuable employees in an organization.

The consultant tells Bertha that responsibility for gathering data and developing complex strategies should be assigned to Floyd. His need for exactness and his talent for establishing priorities are very important to the team. However, he should not interfere with Penelope's brainstorming and her talent for experimenting.

Penelope should continue to improvise solutions and alternatives. However, she needs to structure her brainstorming activities so they do not disrupt Floyd's work flow or that of other members of the team.

The consultant also recommends that Bertha immediately assign Mary to work with Floyd and Penelope on a daily basis. She will serve as something of a conative interpreter. Mary is able to explain to Penelope why Floyd needs a specific report or other data, and she helps Floyd understand the benefit of allowing Penelope to develop and experiment with a new process or solution.

Amazingly, within a matter of days, productivity on the team has shown significant improvement. Penelope and Floyd are both feeling more creative and energized. They communicate with one another throughout the workday (usually with Mary's assistance), and they both appear to be much happier in their work. Additionally, Bertha's consultant has identified a number of ways in which adding another team member who initiates with Implementor could help her to maximize the use of space in the office, design safe facilities for servers and other hardware throughout the company, and enhance overall productivity.

Ultimately, conative conflicts on any team have little or nothing to do with whether a person is intelligent, shy, learning-impaired or gregarious. The challenge and the opportunity that these conflicts provide lie in understanding, identifying, and leveraging our individual, instinctive strengths. So stop wasting time and money on guessing, and help your people strive in the way that comes natural to them. Get conative!

Sources:

(1) Kolbe, Kathy, Conative Connection, (Arizona: Kathy Kolbe, 1990 - 2011) pp. 5-7

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