Making Conflict Work
Harnessing the Power of Disagreement
by Peter T. Coleman and Robert Ferguson

Recall in the last ABC, we talked about a series of books we would review over the next few months that, when taken together, would serve to define what we mean by character, character development, and social learning. We also discussed how gaps in our social learning — in our character development — are increasingly leading to difficulties in our social interactions at work and, perhaps more importantly, outside of work with our friends and family members, within our communities, and in our other social groups and relationships (rates of marriage, divorce, juvenile crime, depression, bullying, among others in addition to shortages in leaders). Last month, we explored the topic of social learning in general, and then took a look at feedback and receptivity to feedback as necessary ingredients in activating our Social Brains, promoting necessary social learning and character development. In this ABC, we will look at another component in our Social Brain's ability to assist us in getting along with others — the management of conflict.

I would like to begin with an anecdote we often use at CIMBA in presenting ourselves to corporate clients. Despite frustration with the results they are experiencing from traditional technical-based training and development approaches to behavioral change, we find our biggest challenge is in making the important distinction between technical (course-based) and adaptive (coach-based) solutions understood. And particularly in making it understood when and in which circumstances to apply these very different solutions. The former works well in addressing performance issues, while the latter is far more effective in addressing issues of character — effective critical thinking and social interactions. We often begin by first pointing to research on losing weight, something to which many of us can all too easily relate, particularly as we grow older. The science shows that while most of us are adept at losing weight (performance issue), the difficulty comes in making the lifestyle changes necessary to keep that weight off (character or behavioral issue). In fact, not only do we regain the lost weight, science shows us that we typically gain back an additional 7 percent on average (which makes a compelling argument to put off losing weight until as late as possible in our lives to avoid compounding that 7 percent through multiple loss efforts!). The key

to success is behavior modification, addressing the mental demands on ourselves (anxieties, worries, fears, and other stressors whether real or perceived) keeping us from making the necessary lifestyle changes that would allow us to keep the weight off. Importantly, we have found that the underlying scientific rationale in the weight loss situation carries over and applies to other behavioral issues as well.

In the case of conflict, corporations are most likely to address conflict management difficulties by sending the errant employee to a course on conflict management. Unfortunately, as we discussed at length last month, knowing something does not necessarily translate into being able to do it. In fact, as in the case of weight loss, we have observed that in too many cases it actually makes matters worse. Although whether it makes us 7 percent worse is something we could test empirically, as a general thought or notion it certainly has appeal. It is not difficult to envision an employee fresh from a conflict management course bursting with confidence in his or her new-found ability to manage conflict, finding that the same, old anxieties, worries, and fears rise up and subvert their conflict management efforts. With her competence demonstrated to be deceptive and artificial, why wouldn't she feel worse? "Even after being taught by the best instructors, I still cannot manage conflict!?!"

But the issue is not one of rational understanding; the issue is a mental construct, a behavioral habit, which demands self-awareness, self-regulation, and social awareness abilities — the functioning of your Social Brain that defines your character, the development of which is far better placed in the hands of a data-driven development coach rather than a content facilitator, trainer or instructor. If the employee had an avoidance issue with respect to conflict before the course, the employee almost certainly will have it after — regardless of what the course teaches them from a content standpoint. Yet, in the face of all of the empirical and anecdotal evidence to the contrary, too many Chief Learning Officers still look to traditional academic course structures for solutions all the while expressing frustration and amazement at the lack of results. What did Einstein purportedly say about doing the same thing over and over again expecting different results? "Have an employee with a conflict or other behavioral issue? Send them to a course, check the box on the performance review, and wash your hands of the issue" – at least until it arises again and impacts performance and well-being. Talk, train, tolerate, transfer, terminate ...

We see the same pattern in a wide variety of situations in the workplace — feedback (as we discussed in last month's ABC), conflict (our discussion here), working with difficult people, difficult conversations, negotiations, dysfunctional teams, and a number of other situations where effective performance is dependent upon some functional degree of competence in social interactions, and particularly when emotion regulation has an integral role to play. Again, recall the CLO quote from last month: "If we pay the best and hire the best, then why do we observe a

normal distribution in performance?" If we are producing the most knowledgeable people in our history (and we are), then why are they so much less capable? Is a deficiency in character and character development adding to or compounding the complexity and ambiguity inherent in today's VUCA work environment? We think yes.

On this note, I would like to share an experience from our trip last month to visit several important schools in our Consortium. We had the pleasure of visiting with a number of Deans and long-time friends during the visit (Special thanks to Tim Shaftel and Molly Rapert for hosting us in your homes). Two particular conversations served to provide strong evidence of this social learning gap and to suggest viable solutions, both at the University of Arkansas. Prof. John Ozment, an expert on logistics and supply chain management, told us about a trucking company that used big data to identify certain driving patterns and tendencies that highlighted apparent driver anger management (periodic episodes of unexplained hard acceleration) and focus/attention (periodic episodes of unexplained hard breaking, suggesting distractibility) issues. The company's intent was to reduce accidents costs and reputational costs associated with driver misbehavior. While we could certainly see the trucking company sending identified drivers to courses on either anger management or attention or both, the company elected to focus on the underlying emotional or Social Brain issues, using instead a development system quite similar in nature to our system. By focusing on emotion regulation — character development, an adaptive solution — rather than on anger management and increased attention from a course-based, content or knowledge perspective — a technical, or performance solution, accidents and reports of driver misbehavior dropped significantly. The Dean at Arkansas (and about to become the Dean at Texas A&M) Eli Jones saw similar potential benefits from using awareness technology in the area of improving sales productivity, an area in which he is a recognized expert. Note that sales is an application of our technology in the testing phase with our technology partners, producing impressive results we will be sharing with you shortly. As we discussed earlier, there is now ample evidence of the effectiveness of social learning and the development of the Social Brain and particularly in such demanding areas of application as finance, first responders (military), and in athletics. We continue to believe that the Social Brain and character development through social learning form the coming revolution in education — all supported by advances in mobile technology, biosensors, and data analytics. We are clearly on the cusp of new technology era, the era of technology as an Awareness Multiplier.

Against this background, let's take a look at the critical character skills of conflict and conflict management. While there is certainly a number of interesting works on conflict available (Amazon lists more than 75,000 books with "Conflict" in the title), my criteria in choosing a book are that it is well researched (as evidenced by references and footnotes to recent and relevant research), goes beyond mere description to define strategies, techniques, tools, and thought

processes for implementation, and, most importantly, understands the indispensable linkage between knowledge and emotion in bringing about measurable productivity enhancements — the fundamental roles the Social Brain and the character it defines play in the effective use of the tools provided. The latter enables the reader to move beyond being knowledgeable to being capable. Against these criteria, I found Peter T. Coleman and Robert Ferguson's <u>Making Conflict Work: Harnessing the Power of Disagreement</u> to be quite compelling.

As expected, the authors place considerable emphasis on the use of specific tactics and techniques in defined conflict situations. Those situations are defined by an individual's ability in confronting a conflict to understand the value of the relationship, whether he and the other disputant have shared or competing goals, and the individual's relative power position. Based on these three variables, the authors define seven situations that serve to "help us to anchor our understanding of the most common conflict circumstances we face." Like virtually every other work on conflict, the authors then describe "the most common and effective strategies and tactics associate with each of the seven situation types." However, what distinguishes this work from many of the others is that the authors first began by showing us how each of these seven conflict situations affect "conflict mindsets" – a disputant's conflict-related perceptions, emotions, values, and behaviors. It is important to note that the authors make clear that the seven situations represent the most extreme combinations of relational importance, cooperation or competition, and power distribution. In other words, conflict situations are understandably less black and white and more shades of gray. In addition, they make the point that the more extreme the situation, the more it will likely override your habitual response to a conflict: "Even though strong personalities will tend to respond to conflicts in the way the personalities dictate (think of Donald Trump), extremely strong situations will tend to override personality and dictate behaviors (think of Donald Trump in prison)." Most of us will have little difficulty recalling situations where the people and the place involved in our conflict caused us to respond in a manner far different from our more typical response.

Without question, our ability to manage conflict has a significant influence on the quality of our life experience. At CIMBA, we place considerable emphasis on character and the functioning of an individual's Social Brain. Through the interactions with others in our various social groups, we learn to perceive and interpret social cues to gain insights to appropriate social norms of behavior. Those interactions served to develop our character with our "histories, sensitivities, temperaments, gender, training, cultural upbringing, language, levels and impulse control, and other characteristics [combining together] to affect how we generally tend to respond to conflict" and other situations where social emotions and our ability to regulate them define our ability to be capable. While workplace research shows that some 40 percent of a manager's day is spent in

conflict and conflict management, how can that number be much different in our families, amongst our friends, in our social groups, or in our communities?

At CIMBA, we believe that an effective behavior modification intervention begins with a focus on the individual's Social Brain, with assessments (both psychometric and biometric) defining the prerequisite self-awareness, social awareness, and self-regulatory development necessary to provide a foundation upon which a specific behavioral attribute such as conflict management can be built. The authors here provide the best avenue for the natural flow with this requisite social learning. Ongoing attention to social learning will greatly assist individuals in being able to identify conflict situations and to better apply the strategies the authors provide. It is the importance placed on the conflict mindset, which we see as being strongly influenced by the individual's Social Brain, that best serves to distinguish this work from lesser others. In the words of the authors, "people who choose [the appropriate] strategy … are more happy and satisfied with conflict and with work in general. They feel more of a sense of efficacy and control over their conflicts and their life." In addition to applying the requisite skill, having the character to be openly receptive and then to effectively interpret social conflict cues are indispensable characteristics gained through character development and social learning — and in significant need of nurturing.

Throughout the text, the authors provide a variety of personal assessments, which serve additionally to generate insights into our Social Brain's thinking patterns (although the authors do not label them as such). Each of the main chapters describes in detail a specific approach strategy in response to one of the seven defined conflict situations, and provides the reader with an opportunity to see the specific conflict situation from both disputants' perspective and, in this way, further supports the development of social awareness. At CIMBA, we would further support the practice of such tactics through the use of awareness technology and, in this case, particularly with our stress assessment mobile application to assist in the development of self-awareness. In this way, users would be able to track their progress in the use of the tactics suggested by the authors. Making Conflict Work will certainly be our go-to conflict guide.