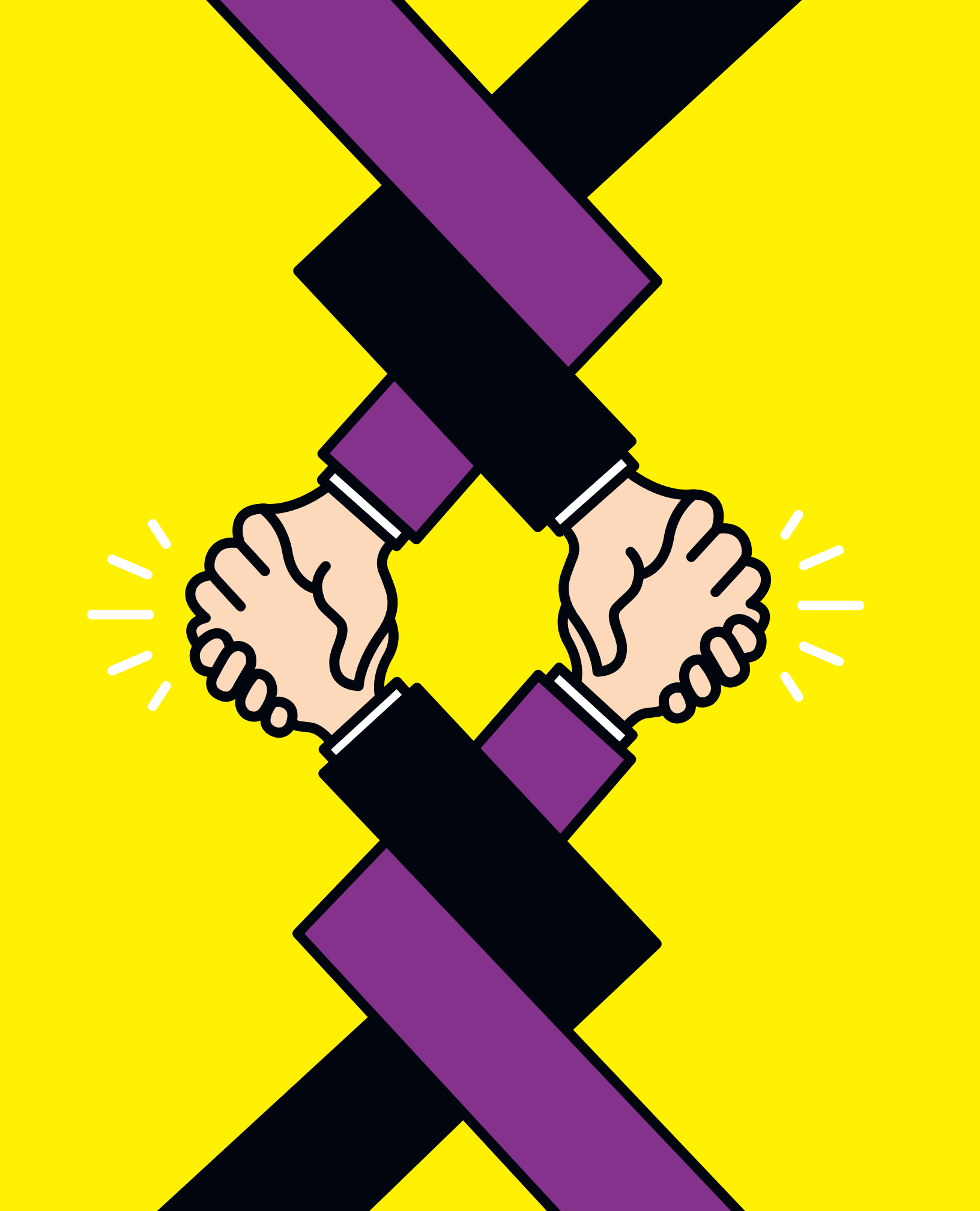

MANAGING CONFLICT CONSTRUCTIVELY

Most workplace disagreements stem from one of three sources: different agendas, different perceptions and different personal styles. Here's how to work through all three.

by Karen Dillon

WHEN WE THINK ABOUT CONFLICT, what often comes to mind is war: factions diametrically opposed over a significant issue. But not all conflicts are struggles for power or property or people. Lines are often drawn at work, too — and just because a workplace is civil and quiet doesn't mean it is devoid of conflict.

Consider this story. Robin and Eli worked together on a joint project virtually, from different time zones. Robin spent her mornings drafting the piece of the project she'd be working on that day with Eli. When Eli came online several hours later, he wouldn't read what Robin had done; instead, he wanted to work together in real time to create a bullet-point outline. This practice annoyed Robin. Why had she spent hours getting a head start if Eli was going to ignore her work and control the conversation later in the day anyway?

She fell in line, ceding to his way of working — but she also started getting grumpy with him, growling at his suggestions or huffing her way through his re-creation of work she'd already done. This passive-aggressive dance went on for weeks, until finally, Robin quit doing any work on the project. Eli didn't even notice that she had stopped contributing until Robin broke and flagged it for him.

Sometimes, conflict is quiet. It's also widespread. In fact, employees at all levels spend 2.8 hours a week dealing with unproductive conflict, according to a 2008 study by **CPP Global**. That adds up to more than $350 billion a year in wasted wages. Unproductive conflict might be as simple as experiencing a perceived slight or misunderstanding a process, as was the case with Robin; or it could be as complicated as locking horns in a client presentation. Either way, we waste company time and money either entrenched in these fights or avoiding a confrontation. Worse yet, work disputes also likely bleed into your personal life, consuming your precious free time with worry, dumping

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misplaced frustration on your family, and placing unwelcome stress on you. So why don't we just have the argument and then move forward?

In general, we avoid addressing uncomfortable issues because very few people like to deal with conflict head-on. "People have a basic need to be liked," says leadership consultant **Ron Ashkenas**. "As soon as you get into a conflict, there's this discomfort that the relationship is going to be broken." On top of that fundamental human need, there are layers of complicated reasons that make it difficult to confront someone. Perhaps you've tried, and failed, to resolve clashes in the past, or you fantasize that your boss will notice and intervene. But conflict is seldom resolved through avoidance or wishful thinking.

Even the most conflict-averse of us can develop productive ways to confront — and resolve — thorny issues. The following guidelines will help you manage conflict more constructively.

GET MORE COMFORTABLE WITH CONFLICT. First, you need to recognize that *not all conflict is bad*. In fact, it can be healthy, leading to creativity, collaboration and problem solving. Consider the classic tension between sales and product teams: aggressive reps make customers promises that the product teams can't possibly deliver. Or so it seems — until the drive to satisfy the customer and meet expectations leads to innovations in manufacturing, product design — and sometimes, completely new offerings.

"Teams composed of high-performing individuals are naturally subject to contradictory tensions and rivalry," suggests **Mark de Rond**, an associate professor of strategy and organization at the Judge Business School, University of Cambridge. But these tensions should not necessarily be 'managed away': de Rond has found that they boost productivity and help teams perform better, because they stem from the same diversity of skills, approaches and opinions that help the group build a complete big-picture view.

SEPARATE EMOTION FROM OUTCOME. Consciously separate how you feel about the conflict from how it is affecting your work. It's possible that even though a situation seems tense to you, it's not actually interfering with excellent results. For example, participating in an after-action review of a failed product launch may raise your blood pressure, but this discussion may also yield useful process changes to avoid such disasters in the future.

To help disentangle your feelings from your output, ask yourself whether your struggles with a colleague have actually had a negative impact. Have they made the project schedule slip or jeopardized a client relationship? It's not uncommon for work that feels difficult while it's under way to actually be stellar in the end — and recognizing this can help you see how tension is an integral part of the creative process.

DON'T MAKE IT PERSONAL. You may also feel uncomfortable with conflict because you don't like the idea of 'attacking' someone. But you can confront someone without shredding their character. When you focus on the problem at hand — instead of the person involved — you can challenge a colleague without it sounding like — or being — an attack, advises Ashkenas. Asking probing questions and challenging assumptions, for example, and using language such as, 'Have you thought about X or Y?' can go a long way toward shifting the conversation from 'attack' to a calmer exploration of an issue.

IDENTIFY AND RESOLVE YOUR CONFLICT. No matter what the source of conflict is, the key to resolving it is not to struggle in silence, says Ashkenas, but to bring your concern out in the open. "Try to make the implicit, explicit," he says. Identify it for yourself first, and say it out loud: "Nicolas and I have fundamentally different priorities on this project." A problem that is never articulated is unlikely to be solved.

When you've collected your thoughts and cooled down from any annoyance you were feeling, go see your colleague, privately, to discuss what's bothering you. In essence you're asking for his permission to have a discussion, advises organizational development and HR expert **Susan Heathfield**. You can do this by e-mail or by popping by his office. If your colleague isn't ready to have a discussion, he's likely to beg off: "Not today, I'm swamped." But try again the next day. Don't go in with guns blazing: have your key points ready about your view of the differences, and be prepared to listen.

Although situations vary, there are three universal pieces of advice for having a productive disagreement:

- **Articulate.** Understand and be able to clearly express what the clash is about.
- **Empathize.** Consider your colleague's point of view.
- **Have courage.** An honest conversation that recognizes your different perspectives will propel you both forward.

Sources of Disagreements

Most disagreements stem from one of three sources, says **Jeff Weiss**, a partner at **Vantage Partners** and an expert in conflict management.

SOURCE 1: Different Agendas

When it comes to conflicts born of different agendas, we often see well-intentioned people working toward different and legitimate aims who allow a situation to turn into a black-and-white dispute: 'I want X. You want Y. We can't agree; one of us has to lose for the other to win'. This is the most common source of workplace disputes, and it isn't personal, Weiss says. You simply have different roles and goals. How can you find common ground despite these different goals? You need to sit down to talk with the other person to figure out what you're each driving toward.

THE WRONG WAY TO HANDLE IT: Suppose you're a salesperson trying to close a large deal with a customer to meet your monthly goals. You've decided to offer a substantial discount and forgo the customary 25 per cent deposit in advance of any work. This is a long-time customer, and you don't want to risk losing them to an aggressive new competitor. You try to slip the paperwork under the legal department's nose on a busy Friday, so that it won't hold you up. But your colleagues are used to such frenzied month-end tactics. They know well the high price of poorly-outlined terms that make it painful or impossible for finance to collect. They intercept the documents — calling out the deviations from standard contracts — and return a redlined nightmare that prevents you from closing the deal, serving your customer, and meeting your target.

A BETTER WAY: Explain what you're trying to achieve: 'This is a long-time, reliable customer, and we've never had a problem with payment. I'm really worried that we're at risk of losing this customer to a competitor who is offering far more favourable terms. I'm trying to take some of the bureaucracy out of our agreement here to close a deal quickly and edge out our competitors.' Empathize with your colleagues. What were they trying to achieve? 'May I ask why you're leery of putting the contract through as it is? What concerns are you trying to address with your edits?' Get beyond accusations and ultimatums such as, 'You can't do that' to discover what is motivating the behaviour you don't like. The key to a productive outcome here is coming to an understanding of what is driving each other's agendas, says Weiss. When you learn more about why someone has a different view than you do — and you have a chance to explain your own — you are far more likely to find a creative solution that works for both of you. Your goal isn't to 'win', but to find a better way forward based on your increased comprehension of each other's interests. It may be that the legal department doesn't want a culture of one-off contract terms to become the norm; or you may discover a new law that exposes your company to unseen liability if a particular clause is excluded from a contract. With an open conversation and brainstorming, you'll likely find a path that is better for your company.

SOURCE 2: Different Perceptions

In conflicts that arise due to different perceptions, the basic facts are not in dispute, but what you *think* about those facts varies based on your personal filters. Two people can be in the same meeting and walk away with completely different ideas about what the next steps are. You just see the world differently. Resolving differences in perception, de Rond says, requires an explanation from both parties. Understanding your colleague's point of view — and how she came to it — and sharing how you came to yours will help you create a shared view.

THE WRONG WAY TO HANDLE IT: Say you and your colleague Rohit are asked to join the team that will redesign your company's website. The CEO's mandate is to create a high-quality web presence using the best internal resources possible. You think that entails targeting resources — getting internal buy-in on key aspects related to function. As such, you're willing to risk delaying the launch so that finance, sales and marketing are happy with the shopping

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cart functionality. But Rohit seems to be interpreting 'best internal resources possible' to mean that *everyone* needs to weigh in on the look and feel of the new site. Rather than giving formal presentations to keep folks up-to-date, he's conducting one-on-one sessions with random people — for instance, asking finance colleagues what they think about colour palettes or fonts. His feedback-collection strategy threatens to delay the schedule, and for what purpose? Needless niceties of tapping a group that has no expertise in this area?

The CEO put you both on the team because you're known for bringing difficult projects in on time. But you're steaming over Rohit's approach, whereas he thinks the approach you're advocating excludes employee input. You confront him: 'Enough with the cube-by-cube tour of wireframes! You're more concerned with looking like a 'project manager of the people' than you are about the impact all this feedback will have on the people who actually need to act on it." He is genuinely shocked and hurt; the way he sees it, he's been following the CEO's orders. How did you get to such different places?

A BETTER WAY: Assume that your colleague has good reason for his different opinion. Ask him to explain how he sees the issue, and then you should have the same opportunity. Digging into what you each think something means (i.e. what does 'best use of internal resources' look like to you?) will help you both better manage your expectations and future behaviour. 'Can you help me identify which presentations you thought were important, and which ones you decided to pass on?' Listen to his reply. It could be, for example, that Rohit's informal conversations with people in the finance department suggested that they'd rather not sit through an hour-long PowerPoint presentation and preferred to offer their recommendations in a more ad hoc format. You don't have to agree with his view, but you should acknowledge it: 'I can see why you wound up chatting with the finance folks one-on-one, given their schedule constraints.'

Then share what's behind your perspective: 'Let me explain why I think it's important to consult people from different departments only on their area of expertise.' It may be that neither of you is able to agree with the other person's perspective, but at least you'll know why you disagree. And your conversations may then lead to an alternative view. Together, you can craft a productive solution: the two of you could co-host town-hall-style meetings to targeted groups, but make attendance voluntary. You could then send summary briefings to the core team members for their feedback before they finalize decisions — all well within the bounds of your schedule.

SOURCE 3: Different Personal Styles

Type A personality versus creative maverick; deadline-driven person versus 'schedules are only guidelines'. Conflicts born of different personal styles can be the most difficult to navigate, because at their core, it might be that you and your colleague are completely different. But as with the other two sources of disagreement, your primary goal is to see where your colleague is coming from and what is motivating his behaviour, says Weiss. Understanding, appreciating, and trying to take advantage of your different views will help you move forward.

THE WRONG WAY TO HANDLE IT: Say you're a punctual person. You make a point of being on time or early to every meeting you attend or facilitate. You come prepared, you've put away unnecessary electronics, and you don't get caught up in small talk that eats away at meeting time. Your colleague Alan, on the other hand, routinely turns up to meetings 10 minutes late. He breezes in, all apologies, and then looks expectantly at you as facilitator to bring him up to speed. Everyone who arrived on time endures a rehashing of material they covered only minutes ago. The people in the meeting roll their eyes at you for not being sensitive to their time, and you're mentally throttling Alan. Everyone's frustrated, and now you're behind on your agenda, too.

The next time Alan turns up late for your meeting, you dramatically stop the discussion and make a spectacle of his tardiness: "Alan, how *nice* of you to join us!'' Or perhaps you begin overloading his inbox with excessive meeting reminders, hovering near his desk when it's time to head to the conference room. You're so focused on your annoyance with him, you don't pay attention to the five other people who consistently turn up for your meetings on time and prepared.

A BETTER WAY: Take a moment to remind yourself that people

who are different from each other can still get along. Think about what's really bothering you. When you've collected your thoughts and emotions, meet with your colleague to learn more about where he's coming from and to find a way to work together. You might say, "Alan, I'm frustrated when you're late, because I feel that we either can't start without you or if we do start, we'll need to pause and bring you up to speed. Is there something I can do to schedule meetings in a way that works better for you?" He may reveal a very good reason for consistently being late: perhaps he has seen from the agenda that the first five minutes will be an overview of the project — really for the benefit of more-junior employees — and that his contributions won't be needed until later in the agenda.

Once you've both shared your perspectives, you can work toward a solution. For example, you might conclude that Alan will take a narrower role in the meeting: perhaps he joins the group at an agreed-upon time to serve as an expert on a key issue. Or you could let him know when it's particularly important that he attend a meeting so that he can rearrange his schedule or commitments to be on time.

Know When to Bring In the Boss

As a last resort, it's okay to escalate a problem with a colleague to your boss, says Weiss — but *only after* you've given some real thought to why you haven't been able to resolve the issue on your own. Most managers aren't interested in fighting your battles for you, but if everything you've tried has failed, enlist the other person involved to avoid looking as if you're 'tattling'. In a calm moment, go to your colleague and see if you can at least jointly define the problem and diagnoses for it to better help your manager help you. Acknowledge that you're both trying to do the right thing; you just happen to disagree on what that is, and admit that you're at a standstill. 'John, I don't think you and I are getting anywhere trying to resolve this issue. Would you be willing to go with me to ask Lydia for her help in finding a solution?' Such transparency builds trust.

It's in your mutual interest to avoid being seen as difficult to work with or unwilling to compromise. When you meet with the boss, explain that you seem to have different objectives (or work styles, or perceptions) and that you've come to at an impasse. This is not an opportunity to complain about the other person — either directly or through passive-aggressive language (such as 'John seems to think that it's worth risking losing a key customer in order to keep the historic blueprint of all our contracts intact').

Instead, state the issue clearly, focusing on the problem, not the personalities: 'We're stuck, and we need your help thinking this through.' Frame the conflict by describing its impact on the organization. 'This customer is worth $10 million to us annually. We want to be careful not to establish a bad precedent for overlooking important legal protections — but if we can't agree on the right language for this contract quickly, we risk the customer looking elsewhere.'

Briefly explain what you've tried thus far. Your neutral airing of the issue, your united front in appearing at the meeting, and your demonstration of how you've tried to solve the problem will make your boss more willing to work with you both. She may know of other internal resources — such as in-house mediation services or organizational guidelines for conflict. Or she may just make a judgment call that you both have to live with.

In closing

Finding productive ways to work through conflict with your colleagues offers tremendous benefits: a unified front for working with customers and suppliers, faster and better internal decision making, reduced costs through sharing resources and expertise, and the development of more innovative products and solutions. In the end, choosing to be effective involves working through conflict, and it's a skill that can help drive your own performance and career to a much better place. ***RM***

Karen Dillon is a contributing editor at *Harvard Business Review*. She is the co-author of several best-selling titles, most recently *Competing Against Luck: The Story of Innovation and Customer Choice* (HarperCollins, October 2016).
The preceeding is an adapted excerpt from her *HBR Guide to Office Politics* (HBR Press).