

## 4 Social

The film *Her* gave us a fictionalised glimpse into the curious area of AI-human social interaction. Apps such as Siri and Alexa integrate certain anthropomorphic or humanised features that lend a social dimension to how we use them. This social dynamic can enhance our feelings of engagement with the product, service and the organisation behind them – or not. AI social interaction again treads a fine line between users feeling engaged, or feeling unsettled and even alienated.

Take this discombobulating exchange, reported by *BusinessNewsDaily* in 2020:

Bot: "How would you describe the term 'bot' to your grandma?"

User: "My grandma is dead".

Bot: "Alright! Thanks for your feedback." (Thumbs-up emoji.)

### What can managers do?

• **Be informed.** To avoid bot "fails", firms are increasingly informing themselves about the dynamics of alienation. Not

only can they collect information directly from consumers who have experienced alienation to gain valuable insights into how and why it occurs, they can also collaborate with experts such as psychologists, sociologists and gerontologists to discover more about the causes and consequences of alienation.

• **Be careful.** Anthropomorphism is a double-edged tool. Many designers and marketing managers take it for granted that humanising AI fosters better relationships with consumers. But this is not necessarily the case. Human beings are characterised by a heterogeneity so nuanced and complex that the margin for error is immense. There is also massive scope to draw on and calcify certain harmful stereotypes, such as the use of passive or "subservient" female voices in many AI apps, a possibility that should be on organisations' radar screens. Progressive firms are increasingly investigating how to make

AI gender-neutral and, in some cases, less rather than more humanoid. AI-enabled products and services promise to make consumers happier, healthier and more efficient. They are often heralded as forces for good – tools to tackle not only the common but even the biggest problems facing humanity.

The potential of AI is undeniable. But so, too, are the dangers of oversimplification and the inherent tendency to efface intersectional complexities of human psychology and sociology and ignore issues such as gender, race, class, orientation and more.

The challenge to managers and developers is to design and deploy AI critically and with care; to be aware, informed and careful that AI can be impaired by our own biases and flaws. AI is only as good as the humans who create it. □

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# When conflict works to your advantage

Randall S Peterson reveals why conflicts involving two team members drive group learning and performance

Diversity always has the potential to improve business. When you bring different perspectives and points of view together, you can unlock the potential to solve bigger, more important questions.

Of course, it's also true that the more perspectives you have, the more conflict there is likely to be. We see this in every group, in every team and every organisation, and we see it all the time. Wherever people think differently about an issue, conflict is inevitable.

For team leaders this is a conundrum: how do you leverage all the good stuff, such as the potential for learning that comes from diversity, while also managing

the counterproductive and unhelpful trade-offs that can ensue from conflict?

### GOOD VERSUS BAD CONFLICT

- **Task conflict** (disagreement that is cognitive or informational) = conflict with the potential to create positive outcomes if managed well.
- **Relationship conflict** (disagreement that is affective or interpersonal) = conflict associated with negative outcomes.

Together with colleagues from the universities of Minnesota, Washington Bothell and Northern Illinois, I have been looking at the structure of group conflicts to get a better understanding of how they originate, how they evolve and how they

impact performance. We know from the literature that conflict can take different forms in teams. It can be dyadic (that is to say, a dispute between two individuals within the group). Conflict can also manifest in the form of one "bad apple" – a single (usually toxic) individual who unsettles the group – or "bad blood", where you have warring sub-groups or factions. It can even be a whole-group dynamic, where everyone in the team ends up embroiled in a dispute, each advancing their own perspective in opposition to the rest.

To unpack all this and see what's really happening under the hood, we ran three large-scale studies using different demographic groups and types of organisation. This entailed comprehensively surveying undergraduates at a major public university in the US, a number of executives enrolled on a one-month executive management course in the UK, and more than 80 individual employee teams in a large Chinese manufacturing organisation. We asked them to tell us about the conflicts they experienced, who was involved, what happened over time and how they affected team outcomes.

What we found is as surprising as it is significant: conflict is uniform – both in structure and characteristics – whatever the demographics, organisation or group.

The results are the same: whole-group conflict is rare; bad apples surface and bad blood happens from time to time, but the overwhelming majority of group conflicts are dyadic. More than 50% of all group conflicts take the form of two individuals at loggerheads, while the rest of the group remain onlookers or adjudicators.

And that's not all. We also find that conflict tends to be sticky. While conflicts don't always escalate in size or intensity, they do have a tendency to hang around in organisations, resurfacing even after they have officially been resolved.

So, what does this mean for businesses?

Perhaps most surprising and significant among our findings is the discovery that none of this is bad news – quite the opposite, in fact.

### Why one against one equals success

Let's assume that some conflict is good for business. Without a degree of dissent or debate it's hard to really explore all the dimensions of a problem. The trick is to find the sweet spot: just enough conflict to unearth the big issues, but not so much that you end up getting stuck.

What we find in our studies is that this sweet spot occurs naturally when conflict is dyadic in nature.

Looking at grade outcomes among the students and executives and hard performance data from the Chinese manufacturing teams, the impact is clear: disputes between two team members, with the rest as adjudicators, creates a dynamic that positively drives performance.

It's just as important to note that this effect doesn't occur in the other conflict structures we observe. We don't see this with whole-group disputes, single bad apples or warring factions. The magic seems to happen mostly when you have two people arguing the score while the others listen, evaluate, ask questions or mediate and attempt to figure out who's right and what works.

### CONFLICT AND TEAM PERFORMANCE: THE WINNING FORMULA

- Whole group in conflict = poor performance outcomes.



**Creative conflict:** Most group disagreements occur between two individuals – but can have positive outcomes

### 'What we found is as surprising as it is significant: conflict is uniform in structure and characteristics, whatever the demographics, organisation or group'

- Warring factions in conflict = poor performance outcomes.
- One individual in conflict with group = average-to-poor performance outcomes.
- Two individuals in conflict, rest of group looking on = positive performance outcomes.

So, what's going on?

It seems that when disagreement happens between two individuals it can create a space for others who are not invested in the conflict to actively listen, learn and evaluate the pros and cons of both sides, weighing up the arguments before making the call.

When everyone is caught up in the conflict or entrenched factions emerge, the focus shifts from listening and learning to forcing the win. Similarly, when a lone individual takes on the group,

too often there is limited space for listening and learning to happen, however compelling their argument may be.

There is a parallel here with the dynamics at play in political elections. Opposing sides might look to shore up their base by advancing extreme or partisan arguments in the hope of a win. But elections are not usually decided by the left or the right. They are decisively won by reaching the middle ground – the undecided voters who are not committed to either side, but who are open to cogent, well-reasoned argument.

Dyadic conflict in the group creates an opportunity for learning to emerge. This is because research shows that when people are exposed to different points of view it causes them to think divergently, and that increases their capacity and opens them to change. The magic happens when you