

Create a Thriving Work Environment with Eamon O'Leary



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Hosts

CrisMarie Campbell and Susan Clarke

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CrisMarie Campbell: Welcome to The Beauty of Conflict, a podcast about how to deal with conflict at work, at home and everywhere else in your life. Hi, I'm CrisMarie.

Susan Clarke: And I'm Susan. We run a company called Thrive, and we specialize in conflict resolution, communication and building strong, thriving teams and relationships. Conflict shows up in our lives in so many ways. Most people, unfortunately, are not very good at handling conflict. Most people have never been taught the right tools for dealing with conflict, and then it leads to unnecessary friction, arguments, passive aggressive emails, tears, hurtful comments, stuck-ness, all kinds of things we don't want. We're on a mission to change all of that.

CrisMarie Campbell: We've spent the last 20 years teaching our clients how to handle conflict in a whole new way. We're here to show you that conflict doesn't have to be scary and overwhelming. With the right tools, you can turn a moment of conflict into a moment of reinvention. Conflict can pave the way into a beautiful new system at work, a new way of leading your team, a new way of parenting, a new chapter of your marriage where you feel more connected than ever before. Conflict can lead to beautiful things.

So, we have a very special guest on our show today. It is Eamon O'Leary, a VP of network operations at Sprint, head of the West area, and we know Eamon from many years back. A couple of different companies we've worked with you. So, Eamon, can you introduce yourself, and where you're from, your current role, even your career path and where we connected?

Eamon O'Leary: Really briefly, I'm originally Irish. I moved to the U.S. in the early '90s. Joined McCaw Cellular in Kirkland, Washington. Stayed with McCaw through the AT&T merger, and then stayed with AT&T Wireless after the Cellular merger more in tech dev area. Then in '05, I joined Clearwire as head of engineering, and then we were bought out by Sprint,

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and I think it was 2013. Ever since then, I've been working with Sprint running the West region for the network group.

So, in my current role, I have the West region, which is pretty much everything from Texas up to Montana West. In that role, I'm responsible for a group of RF engineers, microwave engineers, cell site people who build cell sites and operate cell sites. So, basically, building and operating the wireless network for Sprint. We just recently launched our first 5G networks in L.A. and in Phoenix, and a lot of great experience building out 5G just a sample of what's to come. So, that's what I'm currently doing with Sprint, and it's a lot of fun.

CrisMarie Campbell: Fabulous. Now, you were one of our first clients where we really, I thought, had an impact in transforming the team. We worked with you at Clearwire, we worked at you AT&T, but AT&T was the first time. My memory is you had in charge of a few different teams, but one area in particular was giving you a tough time. Can you talk about what was going on and what happened for our listeners?

Eamon O'Leary: Yes, if I can remember back that far. I believe it was in the early 2000s. One of the groups I had was the network OSS development group, the OSS development and operations group, and I also had a core national engineering group, but in the OSS group, we had a lot of personality conflicts to the point where the teams were just not getting along.

They were dysfunctional. The directors weren't working well together. The managers weren't working well together. Everything evolved into a, "He said, she said," and finger pointing. We just couldn't move things forward and get the team working together. So, I brought in a couple of consultants to help with that, and finally, I think one of the consultants had recommended you, and that's when I brought you in.

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We worked through the whole process there with them. It was a great experience for me as well because I think we had a couple of days in an offsite meeting, and in that offsite meeting, we finally got to the point where people just put their raw emotions on the table. In working through the frank, raw discussions, we actually got the teams to the point where they actually became friends, and they actually started working together.

It transformed the whole team from where it was, a completely dysfunctional organization to teams that was working really well together, and continue to build over time, and become a really strong team at the end of the day. That all came back to I think we had a two-day offsite meeting, but before that, we also had some working sessions, but it wasn't a very long period of time that we worked through with you. I think it was probably about a month or two, very well time spent.

CrisMarie Campbell: It really was an amazing transformation, but the two days was a bit uncomfortable when those raw emotions came out, but it was what really needed to happen to shift the dynamic.

Susan Clarke: Yeah, often, we find people want to get through the conflict in some sort of comfortable fashion, and often, when something has gone on for a long time or I think people are really passionate about their job, that's hard to do. In your case, it was something that wasn't going to be easy, but your team hung in, and they did work it through, even though I don't think it was the easiest 48 hours.

Eamon O'Leary: No, it wasn't. It wasn't an easy 48 hours by any means, but I think it was a very good lesson to learn because conflict is good. I kind of want conflict. I want people to be able to say what's on their minds. I want them to be able to say things that are not necessarily accepted by everybody. But I think it's the environment that we create to enable people to say that in a safe environment. That's what you want to wind up with.

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So, if people express their opinions that are not popular opinions, and everybody just jumps on them, that's where you wind up with conflict that's unproductive. What you helped us do is get us to a situation where people were able to express their opinions even if they were unpopular, but it was a safe environment, so people actually discuss them rather than jumping all over each other.

CrisMarie Campbell: Yeah, and I think in the end we said, “We're going to do some healthy stuff. We're going to do some smart stuff,” meaning working on the strategy. I think what happened is through those different consultants, you'd come up with different workflow processes, really probably re-engineering around these bickering people, and then we went back to the original plan after having this tough conversation, and it really rolled out well. Tell me where I'm wrong. That's my memory.

Eamon O'Leary: We tried to solve the problem through reorganization, through process change, and it just didn't work because you still had the same personalities in your organization, and at the pace we were, they were just not going to help the other teams be successful.

So, no matter how we reprocessed, or rejiggered, or reorganized, unless I got rid of the whole team and started over, it wasn't going to work, and I wasn't going to get rid of the whole team because we had good people. We just couldn't figure out how to get them to work together. That's where you guys came in and we knew how to solve that problem.

CrisMarie Campbell: I think so often, leaders are faced with that exact situation, Eamon, where they're like, “Okay, I guess I'll change out the team. I guess I'll move the chairs on the Titanic, basically. I'll move people around, reorganize.” Those are such common problem-solving strategies that really don't address the nugget of, “Hey, these two people have something that happened that really upset each of them, and now, they don't trust each other or respect each other,” and it grows through their organization.

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Eamon O'Leary: It's really having people focus on peer group being the strongest team. When you do that, it transitions people from being dysfunctional to being a functional organization. It's critical.

CrisMarie Campbell: It's true. We call it the A team. Most people, when we ask what's your A team, they'll say, "Well, it's the people I manage because I have pull over them. They have to be nice to me because I'm the boss," and they feel more accountability. But that shift to, "No, we suggest your A team be your peer group, the team you are a member of, because if that team is aligned, oh my gosh, your team's job will be so much easier if your peers are having those tough conversations."

Eamon O'Leary: Yes, and if that team is aligned, the whole organization becomes so much more effective. The other groups around me also become so much more effective because now that A team works so well together.

CrisMarie Campbell: That's true.

Eamon O'Leary: It makes management a lot easier too, by the way.

CrisMarie Campbell: Yeah, it works the same in a family. If mom and dad are aligned, then the kids can't play mom and dad off each other, but if not, then it's a problem.

Susan Clarke: I imagine, because like you said, that was in the early 2000s, and you've gone through probably a number of different teams that you've either been a part of or led. How would you say you've done in incorporating, getting to the right level of conflict, and dealing with the messiness?

CrisMarie Campbell: And having the real raw conversations?

Eamon O'Leary: It's not easy. Let's start there. I think, for me, what I try to do is I try to create a safe environment for people to express their opinions,

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and then I try to create an environment where we challenge each other, but in a good way so that we can sit around the table and we can challenge each other and throw stuff at each other back and forth. It's not in a way where we're trying to catch each other out. It's in a way where we're trying to improve what we're doing.

When we create that safe environment and the teams can see the leadership team working in that kind of environment, it just creates an environment for the whole organization. Then what I try to do is when people's personalities get involved, because we all have our personality, whether we like it or not, you don't want the people with a big ego to drown out to people who maybe are not as confident. You want to try to hear from everybody.

What I try to do is focus on what is the best thing for the business. So, when people start to get emotional, I always try to bring it back to the question, what is the best thing for the business here, folks? So, that I get it away from people's personal, what they're trying to get personally, or if they're trying to make someone else look bad or whatever, and really focus it on business and what can we as an organization do to improve the business.

That's really what we're here for at the end of the day. It really helps to get the people's emotions off the table and refocus it more on the business because the business is across all teams. It's across all people. It's not just one person, one individual, and that really helps me get the teams moving in a good direction. Having those discussions then that are more business focused rather than individual focused.

Susan Clarke: Hey, Eamon, I just want to bring it up because I vaguely recall, and I could be off. This was actually at a different point where we worked with you because I remember we did some work around different types of styles.

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CrisMarie Campbell: Oh, this is when we were doing leadership development at Clearwire, I think.

Susan Clarke: There was another VP at that time had very different styles.

CrisMarie Campbell: Do you remember that VP?

Eamon O'Leary: Yes, I do.

Susan Clarke: I remember because we taught them. What I love about what you were just saying is it's so fits, and you at that time, I think, had somebody on your peer set who was much more expressive.

CrisMarie Campbell: Much more expressive.

Susan Clarke: And much more emotional. That was how he got his job done. I remember it was a pretty big thing for you guys to recognize the differences in your style and find a way to work with each other. Do you remember that?

Eamon O'Leary: He was my customer in the organization, if you like. So, he would challenge me a lot on my deliverables to him. Initially, my reaction was I would put up my fists and, "Okay, John, you want to fight? Let's go fight." What I had to do, I think my boss pulled me out of a meeting once after John and I had a head to head, and my boss said to me, "Eamon, what did you achieve by that?" I said, "Nothing," and he said, "Well, don't do it again."

I said, "Okay. So, how can I approach this differently?" I went in with that question, "Okay, John is raising a good question for the business. It's incumbent on me to address that question and focus it on how can I improve for the business." Once I took that approach with John, it changed the whole dynamic of the organizations and the teams, and we just worked much better together.

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Then when he asked me questions, it wasn't John attacking me personally. It was John asking the right question for the business, and I focused on that aspect of it. My whole team then, I drove them with the same approach. At the end of it, we became enormously productive across the organization to where I think it was probably the most productive team I've ever worked with because of that, John and I, how we actually transitioned a conflicting relationship to a very productive relationship by doing that.

CrisMarie Campbell: Yeah, you were creating what we call mutual purpose, which is what's good for the business and framing it that way, which can also bring mutual respect in that whole process.

Susan Clarke: As long as you recognize that each of you probably have different style points because I do remember, at one point, there was a figure out with John. One data point is really all you need, and you were like, "No."

CrisMarie Campbell: "You need more data."

Susan Clarke: But at that point, you guys found a way like, "What one data point can we agree to?" It really had a ripple effect because in the room were a lot of other key leaders in your organization who also saw you guys find a way through something that in other situations, like you said, it could just look like people are putting up their dukes and fighting, and not actually ever getting through it. So, yes, that was a big element.

Eamon O'Leary: My directors back in the AT&T Wireless days, I was behaving like he was or they were back then. So, I had to go through a transition as well. So, it was good. It was really good.

CrisMarie Campbell: I think that's important for anybody to recognize, is when we have somebody who has a different style or we interpret them as they're trying to make me look bad, or challenge me, we interpret ill intent, it really makes sense that your defenses come up, but it's also, like I appreciate what Perry had said to you like, "Did that work?" Finding a way

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through to work past us and recognizing it probably has little to do with me how somebody asking me a question. It's more to do with them and their style, and not taking that on personally, but recognizing we just have different styles.

Susan Clarke: Well, and the whole idea that sometimes the story you're telling yourself is actually not a story that is useful to the broader business at hand or even to the better relationship, ongoing relationship, and you have to find a way to bring that story out and check it out. You can't just ignore the story, but it does help if you're willing to say, "Wait a minute, was this where you were heading with that? How could we reframe it?"

CrisMarie Campbell: Other key takeaways that you implement in your current day role. I love that when you're interviewing, you ask about an A team, your peer team, being your priority. What other things do you utilize?

Eamon O'Leary: I think for me, it's really ensuring that people are working across the peers is definitely high up there. I think the second one for our leaders would be make sure you listen to people and try to create a safe environment for people. The extroverts among us, type A personalities, will always be heard, but try to create an environment where everyone in the team has an opportunity to be heard and get their points across because when you leverage everybody in the team, you have got a much stronger team other than just listening to the most vocal people.

So, try to create an environment where you get everybody to compose with their opinions and their thoughts, and you listen, and that you actually call them out when there's a situation rather than just focusing on the type A personalities, is to really try and build that organization through listening to everybody.

CrisMarie Campbell: It's so true because meetings are for extroverts, people that think and talk out loud, and to actually slow it down and let the

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other more introverted styles catch up and create a space because they're just as smart. They're just not dominating the conversation.

Eamon O'Leary: That's right. One of the biggest challenges I have today is as we're evolving, and especially with the West region that I have right now, we don't have an office where everybody gathers. People are scattered all over the West, and a lot of people work from home or a lot of people work for an office where there might be just one or two people in the office.

That creates a great challenge because people don't socialize together when people are scattered around the country in the environments that we have now today. It creates another problem where people can't build those relationships, which gets back to then you don't have an opportunity to create that environment where it's safe to voice your opinions because you don't really know the other paper very well. So, that's a challenge that I have today that I haven't solved.

What I'm trying to do is try to create those safe environments. Every couple of months, we fly people into a central location, and we go do team building, and we go do stuff together just to get people to know each other. We have conference calls on a regular basis.

We try to make them fun, and we try to get people to share stuff about each other, but trying to cultivate that social environment when people are scattered all over the West region working from home, it's a very tough thing to do. Without that social connectedness to each other, it's very tough to build those organizations where people can basically get their opinions out there and feel safe doing it. So, that's my current challenge of today.

CrisMarie Campbell: I think your strategy is a good one. We find doing a two-day offsite where it is more intense, people get to know each other, that builds that connective experience. So, people have gotten to that place where you're doing some team building, but you're also talking about the

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business and people are disagreeing, and who, how are we doing this? But they start off having that learning how to have tougher conversation in person, which then helps when they're apart, but also having that kind of a rhythm is important.

We typically, with this one company, work with their team quarterly, so they continue to build that muscle and, “Oh, I really can say something. I really can disagree even when I'm not looking at you directly on a zoom call or a video call. I'm not face-to-face with you.”

Eamon O'Leary: People tend to help each other when they know each other. So, when people don't really know each other or don't have that social connectedness, they're not as willing to help each other. Then the whole organization suffers because people will have to start from scratch to learn something rather than, “Hey, can you help me with this?” Then they're immediately a week or two ahead.

CrisMarie Campbell: I think too, even knowing each other, knowing each other's styles, just like it was with you and John, finding ways through those style differences that, oh, not wanting to work with that person because they have a different style, but once you do get through that, then like you said, it was one of your best teams when you two figured your way through that, which I thought that was incredible.

Eamon O'Leary: Absolutely

Susan Clarke: Because you're in the field of being in wireless and providing the lens by which we don't necessarily have to be face-to-face, but finding how to create that anyway is still vitally important.

CrisMarie Campbell: We are still human beings who want to shake each other's hands, look at each in the eye. So, I love that you're bringing your team together on a regular basis, and I think that's a part of the investment that needs to be made.

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Eamon O'Leary: Yeah, people want more personal interaction with people, and just getting them together face-to-face pays dividends. Definitely worth doing.

Susan Clarke: I agree. I know I said that, and it can seem like it doesn't, but I bet you it actually does support the amount. You may have to spend this much, but this is the return on the investment.

CrisMarie Campbell: Even when you said, "If I know somebody because I've met them in person and I feel safe enough to ask for help, it can save a whole week of my time, two weeks, whatever, getting to the right answer versus spinning my wheels." So, it really has a bottom-line impact to actually create those relationships.

Susan Clarke: The one thing we like to ask and towards the end of our interview with people because we're always applying this both at work and at home. Have you also been able to apply some of these same things at home and either your most significant relationships, or family, or friends?

Eamon O'Leary: Somewhat. When you're dealing with teenagers at home I'm not sure any logic will help sometimes. I'm not kidding, but sometimes you have to let them go make mistakes because it's the only way they're going to learn. The main thing for me is just listening to people, trying to be fair, trying to provide a balanced opinion, give them the pros and cons, but let them make their choice because it's through them children, kids, teenagers making a choice and either messing up or otherwise, hopefully, they won't mess up too badly.

That's how they learn. So, you just creating a safe environment for them to do that, I think, is critical rather than saying, "If you do this, I'll ever talk to you again." It's just trying to be safe with them, push them in the right direction, but if they choose not to do it, then don't cut them out. Just continue to support them.

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CrisMarie Campbell: Eamon, I was thinking that I think what you just said is also amazingly applicable to even in some respects what you were saying about your leadership. Allowing people to fail or make a mistake, but not think it's the end of the world, but have a way to come back, is just as important in business, I would imagine, as it is with your teenager sometimes.

Eamon O'Leary: Absolutely. When people make a mistake or people fail, not to write them off because they have so much experience, and quite honestly, they've learned from mistakes. It's critical that we create an environment where people are safe doing that.

Susan Clarke: That's really probably good you can't fire your teenage kids. It's never really an option.

CrisMarie Campbell: They just keep coming back.

Eamon O'Leary: No, not an option.

CrisMarie Campbell: Well, Eamon, this has been a real treat. You don't know how special you are to us because of how often we actually tell some of the stories in both when we worked with you at AT&T and at Clearwire, not revealing, but they were significant events.

Susan Clarke: Yeah, significant events that really transformed the team, the business, the bottom-line results in both scenarios.

Eamon O'Leary: Yes, it was money well spent on our behalf.

CrisMarie Campbell: Well, thank you, and thanks for taking the time, and we had a few technology glitches upfront, so hanging in there with us.

Eamon O'Leary: All right. Thank you very much.

CrisMarie Campbell: That was such a fun interview with Eamon.

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Susan Clarke: Yes.

CrisMarie Campbell: I don't know if he actually even knows what an impact working with him at AT&T and working at Clearwire had on us, but it was just phenomenal.

Susan Clarke: He is someone who genuinely has taken to heart this idea that when there's conflict, even though he's not comfortable with it, even to this day, it's still not something he's jumping to go deal with, he knows that it's a sign of passion, and it's actually going to be something that's really important for a team to be able to deal with. So, I thought that was really quite remarkable.

CrisMarie Campbell: Yeah, he even said after we had stopped the recording, he goes, "Behind conflict is passionate. If people don't have passion, what are they doing at their jobs?" That first team was such a transformational event when they put their real feelings on the table, and we didn't blink. We held that container, and they worked it through.

Susan Clarke: I love that he brought up the A team piece because that is an important piece that I think can get lost. Remembering it's the team you're a member of, not the team you lead, and so often, that is something that gets lost.

CrisMarie Campbell: The power of listening, making space, not just for the loudest in your meetings, but each person to share, and even listening to your kids, and letting them make a choice, and letting them fail, and at work, and knowing it's not the end of the world.

Susan Clarke: Yes.

CrisMarie Campbell: So, we hope you enjoyed it. We sure did. We'll see you when we come back.

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Susan Clarke: Well, thank you for listening to the beauty of conflict podcast. If you're dealing with a difficult situation in your life or work, remember every conflict is a chance for you to be vulnerable, and curious, and find creative solutions that you hadn't considered before and make your situation even better.

Beautiful breakthroughs can be born out of conflict. We've seen this happen thousands of times over the last 20 years, and we know this is possible for everyone, including you. We're grateful you listened to this show, and we're rooting for you.

CrisMarie Campbell: If you enjoyed this show, please tell a few friends, and/or post a five-star review on iTunes. Your review helps new listeners discover the show, and more people listening to this show means less friction, and arguing, and suffering out in the world. That's a great thing for everyone.

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