Reflections of the Bentley Ombuds

By Eliane Markoff

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I am proud to dedicate this booklet to my husband Gary; to my daughter Audrey, son-in-law Greg, and my grandchildren Reuben, Jack and Molly, and to my mother Jenny Shammas. I am also dedicating this booklet in memory of my daughter Rachel, my father Ben Shammas and my in-laws Henry and Florence Markoff.

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INTRODUCTION

The Ombuds Office hears your grievances and can help you resolve a conflict. Conflicts can be within yourself or between you and others, making you feel anxious, not appreciated or worse.

During the past several years at Bentley, I have been given the opportunity to mediate, conduct workshops and provide you with advice to empower you to constructively resolve conflicts on your own. It has been especially rewarding to receive feedback on the progress many of you achieved after a challenging situation. Learning that someone has taken the time to resolve a conflict, apologize for being unfair, or change behavior to become more collaborative and trusting is invaluably fulfilling. I cannot tell you how much I welcome such feedback.

Which brings me to the purpose of this booklet. I encourage each of us to reach out to our colleagues to express our gratitude, seek greater understanding, resolve covnflicts, big and small, and connect on a deeper level. I hope you will consider sharing your stories and anecdotes with me and with other colleagues so we can continue to build a community of respect and understanding.

My warm regards,
Eliane

Using Our Core Values to Resolve Conflict

Each one of Bentley's core values creates a landscape for the resolution of conflict in a constructive and respectful manner.

- Caring
- Collaboration
- Diversity
- Honesty
- Impact
- Learning
- Respect

Let us start with caring and respect as examples of two core values which will aid in the resolution of any challenging situation, not limited to conflict.

A valuable action to help resolve a conflict with another person is to imagine oneself in the shoes of that person. You may be hurt or annoyed or frustrated with someone's behavior, yet keeping an open mind and trying to understand the reason for that behavior may play a crucial role in achieving a resolution.

Many conflicts occur because of assumptions we make based on our own past experiences. We are all different with unique experiences and we do not always think the same. Our backgrounds are different. Our histories are different. We come from diverse backgrounds (i.e., race, religion, nationality, ethnicity and gender identity). We react differently. Our intentions may be noble, yet our behavior may not reflect them.

A colleague coming across as bossy and controlling may have only intended to be helpful. But it may also be true that the way they went about helping was not the most effective one. You can learn the reason for the bossy and controlling behavior by caring enough to let the person know, in an honest and constructive way, how such behavior affected you.

Caring to understand the other person's point of view by keeping an open mind can go a long way to resolving, or at least managing, conflict. You may be pleasantly surprised and may become less angry once you learn the basis of the other person's point of view or behavior. An additional benefit is that what you discover could become a teaching moment and a valuable learning experience.

Parties often feel relieved, or at least less angry and annoyed, knowing that the other party understands their viewpoint and circumstances even without arriving at the desired resolution. Just knowing that the other party cared enough to listen and show respect in the process can be a turning point.

After showing care and respect while acknowledging and understanding different views, collaboration helps us jointly identify the next steps available to move forward in a more positive and cooperative manner.

Showing empathy and kindness towards someone who disappointed us or hurt our feelings may motivate that person to express remorse and evoke an apology. The impact your respectful response can have on the party who offended you can be a positive one, one that may make that person more aware of his behavior's impact on you. Many times individuals who have faced conflict in the past can develop a stronger relationship after handling a challenging situation effectively.

Bentley's core values define how we expect to behave with each other, with our partners and with other stakeholders. They can also guide us in resolving conflict by addressing challenging situations in a positive and constructive manner.

Reach Out Initiative: Resolving Conflict

As the Ombuds, I strongly encourage people to reach out to address and peacefully resolve a misunderstanding or a conflict they currently have or had in the past, no matter how insignificant or small it may seem.

When addressed and managed properly, disagreements and conflicts can benefit both individuals and organizations. They can engender mutual respect, better ideas, higher productivity, better understanding and increase the chance of success.

It is important to make an effort to work things out. We can start by sending an email or by making a phone call. We can let the person know we are reaching out with a promise to keep an open mind and to listen to what they have to say. We can join forces to identify solutions in order to move forward in a positive and productive way.

If you are interested in reaching out to someone in the Bentley community, why not reference this Reach Out Initiative and ask, "would you like to meet for coffee or tea this week to discuss 'the issue'?"

If you are the recipient of such an email or call, I encourage you to keep an open mind. If you prefer not to accept the invitation, please acknowledge the outreach and politely let the person know that although you appreciate the effort, the timing is not good for you. To the initiator, I urge you not to see failure if your request is rejected but to see it as a first step in doing the right thing to resolve the conflict.

The Ombuds office is here to help you initiate that conversation. It is a resource for you. Inquiries and conversations are kept confidential. As the Ombuds, it is my pleasure to facilitate that path to continued success.

Creating an Infrastructure of Good Conflict

For some of us, the expression "good conflict" might be confusing. How can the words "good" and "conflict" appear together in the same phrase?

My experience as a mediator and an ombudsperson convinces me that the juxtaposition can indeed be justified. Not only do these two words have the potential to be used in the same sentence, but I will go so far as to state that they should be in the same sentence.

Conflict in the workplace or anywhere is inevitable. We are human. We make mistakes. We annoy others. We offend others. We may be oblivious to how our behavior impacts others. We make assumptions. We are often not aware of someone's "hot buttons," and sometimes lack the necessary diplomacy to adequately address a challenging situation with others. We have feelings. We are emotional. We are insecure about certain matters. We often lack the confidence to address conflict, and we especially may lack the know-how to resolve conflict to a mutually beneficial result.

Yes, conflict has the potential to be disruptive and even destructive. It can easily demotivate, negatively impact the work environment, result in low morale and a toxic environment which can lead to lawsuits, all of which are quite unwelcome outcomes.

This paper focuses on how to best utilize conflict to our advantage. It provides some practical and easy to understand steps to increase our chances of benefiting from conflict. It will also provide recommendations on how to manage, as well as how to leverage the benefits of conflict within teams.

What is conflict? Conflict originates from the Latin word conflingere, which means coming together for a fight or a battle. Coming together is an interesting way to introduce a battle or a fight; in other words, a conflict.

To many, coming together connotes a union that is positive in nature. Coming together, therefore, for a battle or a fight could equally lead to a positive outcome, enabling supposed adversaries to become closer in order to listen and learn from each other, to resolve their dispute and to improve their relationship.

Conflict can be internal or external. Internal conflict can lead to cognitive dissonance when one's actions do not align with one's values and beliefs. For example, a person who supports gun control laws can find herself working for a company that manufactures parts employed in the production of guns. Why am I helping make guns when I strongly support gun control? Despite her deeply held personal beliefs, she could try to justify her work because she needs the money; it's the only job available to her in her hometown; or the job is close to her parents' house, allowing for more family visits. But these rationalizations mask the conflict that will remain within her until she either leaves her job or changes her values and beliefs; the former is more likely to occur. An external conflict involves more than one individual and usually takes the form of a disagreement. It could be a disagreement over a specific issue, objective, goal, or a plan to best accomplish a task.

The individuals may agree on the desired result sought but disagree on the strategy and steps needed to achieve that result. This is often referred to as a substantive conflict. If a conflict is not substantive (i.e., it does not point to a specific task or goal), it is most likely an emotional one. An emotional conflict often involves incompatible personalities. We find someone's perfume objectionable; or we do not appreciate a person chewing gum while speaking; or without realizing it, we feel jealous of or intimidated by a colleague.

External conflicts can arise when team members collaborate to complete a project requiring contributions from several individuals. We may not respect comments or ideas presented by one team member. We may not appreciate a team member missing a deadline. We may not appreciate someone coming late to meetings or not coming at all. We may not appreciate someone being distracted by phone calls and emails during a meeting. We may get annoyed by a team member suffering from "shaking leg syndrome". Or, we may hold a grudge merely because someone reminds us of a person who has hurt us in the past.

The reasons can be as numerous as our imagination allows.

When we are new to a team, the inclination may be to avoid possible conflict by staying silent, hoping that our team members will become more responsible, and annoyances will disappear with time. But is that realistic? Will our passivity cause team members to be prompt, meet their commitments, listen to others without interrupting, and devote their undivided attention to the meeting at hand without allowing themselves to be distracted by emails, text messages or phone calls? More likely, those annoyances will not disappear, and our unwillingness to address them head-on only make us more annoyed, even angry, escalating the situation to a more serious conflict that could have been avoided with our earlier and diplomatic intervention. No matter the severity of the conflict, it is usually best to address it early.

Exercise: Identifying and Resolving Potential Conflicts

One way to prepare for conflict within a team is to brainstorm potential situations of conflict and their challenges, even if they never occur. Conducting a brainstorming session to identify possible conflicts is also an excellent way to come together and connect with team members to build trust, increase collaboration and thereby increase the probability of a successful outcome if a real conflict occurs. Brainstorming in this context is effective because it is done without the inevitable interference of emotion and ego which often arises when a real conflict is confronted. This exercise also allows us to incorporate and confront our own past experiences, personal fears or insecurities and past mistakes; things we should never be ashamed of but instead learn from. For example, a team member may describe how being ignored at a meeting impacted his motivation and self-confidence. Other team members may then become more sensitive to this situation if it arises in the future, enabling them to avoid or de-escalate a potential clash.

Another example may be a team member's concern over a lack of transparency. Perhaps as a member of a previous team, she was never provided with constructive feedback which would have benefited her. She expresses this concern in a brainstorming session with her current team. Her new team members now appreciate the importance of constructive feedback. Team members would then better understand how to motivate and work with her more effectively. In my experience, individuals whose constructive feedback we do not appreciate at the time, may indeed be those who help us the most. Admittedly, sometimes the manner in which the feedback was presented was not always helpful. It may have been expressed in a destructive and negative way. However, if we can put aside the method of delivery and focus on the message itself, we can benefit.

During this brainstorming exercise, each team member may want to share information on their conflict style. Does it tend to be one that is competitive, collaborative, accommodating or avoiding? If a certain style has negatively affected our success or ability to achieve our goal effectively, this may be a good time to share our style with team members. This is especially important if we know we want to learn to become less competitive, more collaborative or less accommodating, characteristics that may have affected us negatively in the past. Awareness of our past "failures" and weaknesses can be the basis of more future success starting today.

There are several exercises and role plays we can conduct to practice different conflict styles, depending on the situation. Other steps can be taken to prepare us to address situations of conflict constructively. Below are some suggestions for a team exercise:

- Create a project plan with specific tasks and specific deadlines.
- Identify the role each team member will play in accomplishing the goals.
- Identify and agree on the success metrics; identify required support or resources needed to ensure success metrics are met.
- Agree on how to best handle the potential situations of conflict, even if they never occur, including specific steps to be taken to remedy conflicts should they arise.

Each team member should consider doing the following:

- Articulate the reasons the team project is of interest.
- Identify resources or support needed to accomplish assigned task(s) successfully.
- List any potential concerns and engage other team members to help mitigate them.

The following is a list of best practices you can use to address conflict:

1. Starting the conversation:

- Begin the conversation early. Learn to recognize and not ignore the early stage of a conflict.
- Meet in person.
- Place your ego aside; focus on what you need to achieve.
- Listen and acknowledge what you hear and allow the other person to express his or her concern; do not interrupt.
- Explain how the conflict is affecting you and your ability to achieve your goals. Use the word "I" and not "you."

2. Getting in the right mindset:

- Articulate what you would like to see happen.
- Focus on the relationship and your common goals.
- Put yourself in the other person's shoes.

3. Working toward a resolution:

- Make suggestions on ways to work toward a resolution.
- Ask the other party to suggest ways to come to a resolution.
- Focus on how a resolution can benefit both parties.
- Be positive and envision a resolution.
- Keep an open mind and consider other creative possibilities.

4. Tips to remember:

- Beware of assumptions; they may be wrong.
- Be willing to apologize.
- Be willing to forgive.
- Be willing to accept change.
- Be willing to let go.
- Today could be the beginning of what you want to see happen.

As you reflect on your prior experiences with conflict, consider the following two questions:

- What is the relationship between an apology and respect?
- What is the relationship between risk taking and trust?

Conflict exists both personally and professionally. When addressed and handled properly in a timely fashion, it can have several benefits to individuals, teams and organizations. Some of these benefits include a better understanding of one another, mutual respect, more creative ideas, greater personal satisfaction, increased motivation, a higher chance of success, and elevated productivity.

Admitting Mistakes

So much time and so many dollars can potentially be saved with only one simple action: admitting a mistake, which might avoid anger, resentment and frustration.

What is a mistake? The definition of the word includes a misunderstanding, inadequate knowledge, an inaccurate comment, a miscalculation, a faux pas, an oversight, a misinterpretation and a misreading, among many other possible definitions.

We all make and will continue to make mistakes. Some will be minor and others major. One imperative for all of us is that mistakes need to be admitted, and it takes courage to overcome our own egos that can hold us back from taking that step.

Many times we are not aware of a mistake when making it. It is in retrospect that we realize we made an error. We probably had good intentions and thought we were doing the right thing, but a mistake it was, nevertheless.

The first step in correcting a mistake is admitting it as soon as we become aware of it. By doing so, we demonstrate self-confidence and self-respect. We demonstrate our willingness and ability to learn from our mistakes and move forward stronger than before. In doing so, we abide by many of our core Bentley values: learning, honesty, respect, caring and collaboration. We also are being true to ourselves and will avoid an internal conflict.

I recently served as the mediator for two colleagues. It was very apparent to me that both parties were responsible for the dispute they now faced. To jump start a possible resolution to their conflict, I asked each party one question in confidence. I assured them that I was not there to judge, but to help each resolve the conflict. I also expressed to them that often the biggest lessons learned, including for me, are triggered by acknowledging a mistake.

I asked each the following question: In retrospect, if you were to undo one action that may have contributed to the conflict with your colleague, what would it be?

Answers usually serve as an opening for effective mediation. Those who can find no action that caused the conflict should reevaluate their answer. Perhaps they may not be at fault because of their actions, but how about their reactions?

Admitting a mistake is a critical step in resolving a conflict. The ability to own up to a misstep or failure can help move forward the resolution process.

Reach Out Initiative: Accepting Accountability

As we gain experiences—both personal and professional—we grow in many ways and develop greater confidence to address challenging situations. Even when we face difficulties, I hear many people say that they have been proud of and empowered by how they addressed their challenges.

Some have even agreed that conflict is not always bad. When managed in a timely and constructive manner, it can result in more open communications, collaborative commitment to the outcome, decisions and overall goals, as well as greater personal satisfaction.

One of the key factors in ensuring "good conflict" outcomes is accountability.

I define accountability in the workplace as taking responsibility for our actions. It may appear that the conflict occurred because of someone else's behavior and that indeed may be the case. However, accountability gives us the opportunity and self-confidence to ask ourselves: Could we have contributed to the conflict?

Conflicts escalate especially when no one takes responsibility. When we hold ourselves accountable, we take responsibility for some fault, sometimes even a greater portion than we deserve. We accept constructive feedback and welcome it to achieve a desired outcome.

This Reach Out Initiative encourages us to accept accountability when warranted. How can we learn to become more accountable when faced with a conflict? We first need to evaluate what happened and focus on the facts, encouraging ourselves not to blame others but to care enough to learn and to understand from them.

We need the confidence to be honest with others but especially with ourselves. We need to recognize that we may have played a more significant role in causing the conflict than initially thought.

Because we tend to personalize a situation, it can be helpful to remove ourselves from the conflict. It may allow us to better reflect on the role we have played in creating the conflict, no matter how small. We can ask ourselves: If someone else is faced with the same situation, how would I advise them to address and resolve the conflict? This can help us move forward to collaborate and achieve a resolution.

When justified, a timely and sincere apology will also help expedite the path to a resolution.

And lastly, we can use conflict resolution as a teaching moment and agree on an effective way forward, focusing on the outcome as well as on the relationship.

Value of an Apology

My hope is that this brief article may serve as a guide to those who are struggling with the word "apology," or to be more precise, with the act of apologizing.

The irony is that many people believe that apologizing has a negative impact on them. They are worried their apology makes them appear weak or shows insecurity; and depending upon the circumstances, that it may be used against them in the future. For the great majority of the time, however, these concerns are unfounded.

Taking the step to apologize, express regret, or ask for forgiveness is almost always the most honorable and noble gesture to make when we have wronged someone else. We all make mistakes in life. The irony is that they are often also the reason for our success in life. The pain of our mistakes motivates us to do better and not repeat them. Although certain mistakes cannot be corrected, many can with a simple and sincere apology.

One of the biggest mistakes made is to try and cover them up. We do that by not being true to ourselves and to others. We rationalize our mistakes with false narratives that some of us end up believing. All that just to avoid an apology. The unfortunate truth is some of us don't have just enough self-confidence to apologize.

To enable the apology to break through, sometimes we need to put our egos aside. We need to appreciate that in most situations, an apology will not only allow us to gain respect, but it also can create a stronger bond with the other party. Convincing ourselves that we were not wrong does not make us appear stronger to others; it is self-defeating and only creates an internal conflict that makes us weaker, not stronger.

When faced with a situation that requires an apology, ask yourself:

- What will making an apology cost me?
- What benefits may accrue after the apology?
- What costs may I incur after an apology?

There will be scenarios that unfortunately escalate to the point where an apology is no longer effective. Often one hears:

- "If only he had apologized earlier, I never would have pursued this action."
- "All I wanted was for her to express regret for how she treated me during that meeting."
- "I am not really looking for financial compensation, I just wanted him to express remorse for the pain he caused me."

If you have wronged someone, I encourage you to find the courage and confidence to sincerely express regret, apologize and let them know it will not happen again. But if you unknowingly wrong someone, explain to the other party your honest mistake when it does come to your attention.

An apology can be liberating, and the most valued part of an apology is that it often results in forgiveness, a priceless gift that we should all give ourselves.

Reach Within Initiative: Extending Forgiveness

Many times, colleagues reach out to the Ombuds because they are angry or in pain mostly due to a feeling of unfair treatment directed at them. They may feel resentment and when the pain is severe enough, they may even wish punishment for the perceived perpetrator. The hurt is heightened when the offender's action is personal, unforeseen and unwarranted.

After validating the feelings of anger and disappointment, when appropriate, I ask the person to share previous experiences with the offender that were positive for their relationship. To my pleasant surprise, they often share notable examples.

I also ask whether there could be a reason the offender acted the way they did. Focusing on a past positive may decrease, but rarely eliminate, the pain. Therefore, one of the most challenging aspects of my job is attempting to lessen the pain in order to motivate and empower an individual to forgive.

Forgiveness is defined as a conscious decision by an individual to let go of feelings of anger toward a person who has harmed them, independent of whether the person deserves forgiveness. Forgiveness does not mean forgetting, nor condoning hurtful behavior.

I am writing this Reach Within Initiative because I have often felt the pain and anger of individuals who have been hurt and felt that they have been treated unfairly. The pain can last for weeks, months and even years.

Regrettably, some individuals will neither apologize nor express regret for the pain they have caused and may even attempt to justify their actions. The realization that people are imperfect and that we all make mistakes may help us gain the capacity to forgive. Can we perhaps recall being forgiven by others? Can such experiences teach us to be more understanding and accepting of our own and others' imperfections?

I encourage all of us to consider letting go of the anger and forgive. Holding on to anger and hurt only does more harm to oneself. Expecting others to apologize or change their behavior makes us "prisoners" of the very pain caused by others. We can only control how we react to painful situations. Being able to forgive can prove to be a valuable gift to the offender but mostly to oneself, freeing us of some of the anger. This Reach Within Initiative encourages us all to give ourselves the gift of being able to forgive.

If you see the value in forgiving someone, I am happy to help. Also, below are a few steps you may consider taking:

- Express your anger and do not deny it.
- Speak with someone you trust who will validate your anger and show you compassion.
- Give yourself a timeline. How long do you want to stay angry? At what point will your anger be destructive to you instead of constructive?
- Write down exactly what you would want to say to the offender in a constructive manner if you had the opportunity to do so; read it out loud and envision the offender hearing it. Consider letting the offender know that the behavior was not acceptable and how it affected you. There is a chance you will be pleasantly surprised by the response. Perhaps the intention was to be helpful and not hurtful.
- Do more of the things that you enjoy whether it is taking a walk, watching a comedy, reading a book or playing a game.

Voicing Concerns

No matter where we work, we will most likely have concerns about how things are done or how decisions are made. This is especially true if we are passionate about our work and our goals.

Expressing our concerns is very critical for many reasons, among them the wellbeing of the organization, its people and mission, our perspective and ideas. But are we being problem solvers or complainers?

Many times, we want to express our concerns in a constructive manner but do not always succeed. Instead, we run the risk of being viewed as complainers. The possibility of being seen as a complainer can have a negative impact independent of how reasonable and sound our concerns may be.

Below are a few suggested steps to consider when expressing and voicing a concern. These steps should increase the chances of a more effective outcome:

- Announce that you have a concern that you would like to share with the group and respectfully ask to be heard. Allow others to accept to hear your concern. Make sure your timing is appropriate. Expressing concerns should not occur when angry but only after we have reflected on the main reasons for our concerns and how the group can take action to help address them.
- Be positive, specific and objective: Why is the concern important to you, to your group, or to the organization as a whole? How is it affecting you? How is it impacting the goals and the mission of the group? Can you think of something positive to express before you state your concern? It could be as simple as expressing your commitment to the wellbeing of the organization and/or mentioning another recent Reach Out Initiative that benefited the group.
- Be a problem solver, not simply a complainer: Make suggestions on how the situation can be mitigated and or improved.
- Agree on the success metrics to evaluate progress.
- Keep an open mind and be flexible as you engage others to provide you with feedback.
- Remember to thank the group for giving you the opportunity to voice your concern.

Reach Out Initiative: Leading with Curiosity

Curiosity is defined as the desire to know and an inner interest to inquire. In addition to playing a significant role in the resolution of a conflict, curiosity, as we all know, is an integral part of academic life.

Faculty inspire curiosity within students not just by sharing their knowledge and providing answers,

but by exhibiting leadership and asking questions to empower students to expand their knowledge to produce their own answers. Successful leaders and managers do the same with colleagues and employees.

Honest misunderstandings and lack of communication often lead to conflict. Being curious encourages us to ask questions and to listen more. It creates a platform for us to question what we think and what we believe is real. When facing a conflict, we feel annoyed, unheard, hurt, angry and disrespected. Asking ourselves if we misinterpreted a behavior or an action by another person may be a good first step to diffuse that anger. The desire to learn and allow ourselves to be curious takes us beyond that first step. This is critical especially when we value a relationship and seek a positive outcome to a disagreement.

Being curious by asking questions in a respectful manner during a conflict shows the other person your interest in resolving the conflict by trying to understand a different point of view. The other party will feel heard. You may not agree with what that person tells you but being heard and respected is critical to moving the relationship forward.

This Reach Out Initiative encourages us to be more curious when facing a conflict or a challenging situation. It encourages us to ask more questions and be an active and attentive listener. It also encourages us to practice many of our core values including learning, respect, caring and collaboration.

Reach Out Initiative: Taking Risks

As Bentley's Ombuds, I often meet with individuals who do not feel comfortable taking the risk of addressing a conflict. They seek guidance as they realize the need to address the conflict. I try to instill the confidence in them to address the conflict themselves, or at least become less uncomfortable in doing so.

Others are hesitant to address the conflict for a number of different reasons. They might offend their manager or a colleague, which they believe a risk too great to take. They appreciate their position and do not want to "rock the boat." They decide that speaking about the issue confidentially with the Ombuds will be sufficient for now. But this last step alone rarely suffices since the conflict with the other person remains unresolved and often grows as an internal conflict.

Those who address the conflict head on are often pleasantly surprised by the outcome and express appreciation for being encouraged to act outside their comfort zone, or in other words taking the risk of stepping out of their comfort zone.

Addressing the conflict can have additional benefits as we answer the following questions:

- Does addressing the conflict help other colleagues?
- Does it help the group's mission?
- Does it help achieve one's goals more effectively?
- Does it help improve morale?
- Does it offer new opportunities?

- Does it have a negative impact in the short run but can be beneficial in the longer term?
- Does it do anything to promote our core values?

Taking a risk or stepping out of one's comfort zone will very often help us more than hurt us. How?

It gives us self-confidence by resolving conflict on our own. Even if the exercise does not end with the desired outcome, at least we have the self-assurance of having tried. But again, we may be pleasantly surprised with the outcome. Even with an unsatisfactory outcome, we may be able to learn from the experience, and make us more willing to take another calculated risk next time.

Having spent many years in research and development, I have learned that researchers who have never failed are not experienced researchers. Those who have disrupted the status quo for the better took significant risks and often failed before succeeding. We can all benefit from taking calculated risks. We can benefit from failure as a growth opportunity which highlights the old saying, "no risk, no reward."

This Reach Out Initiative encourages us to step out of our comfort zone to try and address a challenge or a conflict facing us. Ask yourself, what makes it a conflict? Is it because we see a better way to solve a problem or a more effective and fair process to achieve a goal? Is it because we want to contribute more to our group's success and Bentley as a whole? Is it because it is the right thing to do?

There will always be a certain level of conflict in any growing and changing organization. Taking the initiative to address a conflict in a timely manner or address an issue often yields many of the benefits mentioned above.

Accepting Change

Whether change in the workplace is welcomed or not, most would agree that it is inevitable. Admittedly, it can be disruptive and painful for both employees and managers. Leaving our comfort zones can be anxiety producing and disruptive, especially in the short term. But change can also lead to personal growth and greater job satisfaction for both employees and managers. If change is welcomed, employees become engaged and even excited to move forward as they implement a new strategy and meet the shared goals ahead.

If change is not welcomed, employees will express their anxiety in several ways, such as:

- We do not like the change, and we miss the old ways.
- We are not sure why the change is taking place.
- This change makes us feel insecure because we do not know how it will impact us.

After a period of adjustment, employees often come around to express acceptance, although perhaps reluctantly:

- We are finally beginning to understand the need for change.
- We like our job so maybe we can accept the change.
- We will do the best we can.
- We now understand how our contributions remain critical to the reorganization.
- We wish we could have known earlier what we now know and had seen the positives sooner.

Managers can be very focused as they begin to launch and implement a new strategy and may innocently overlook certain necessary steps during the organizational change. One of these forgotten steps is acknowledging and addressing the anxiety of the employees. Managers can benefit from first acknowledging the potential for disruption and the deep concerns employees may have. Managers can justify and defend change, but only after expressing sensitivity to the impact it may have on employees. Empathy goes a long way to gaining the trust and engagement of employees. It can play a key role in implementing change effectively. Here are some suggestions for managers to facilitate the change they desire:

- Encourage communication and be sincere in wanting to learn and understand employees' concerns.

- Consider sharing one of your concerns about the change and engage them in helping address all concerns, including yours. This could play a key role in engaging them and securing their trust.
- Clearly communicate the specific changes and how they will impact them.
- Share your vision and strategy.
- Solicit and incorporate their suggestions.
- Reassure them that this is a joint effort. Their success is your success and vice-versa.
- Highlight and praise their past successes and accomplishments.

Employees can easily jump to the conclusion that change will be painful and negative. Before jumping to that conclusion:

Understand the reason for the change. Why did the change occur? What advantages may result from the change?

Focus on your job and responsibilities. Do you still enjoy your job? Is your job the same? What impact do the changes have on your responsibilities? Have they changed? How will the change alter your ability to perform your job? Are there certain aspects of the change that you can control? If so, can they positively impact your group/department, and/or its goals? Does the change affect your level of motivation? Do you understand and agree with the success metrics? If you are not sure of the desired outcomes or the success metrics, have the confidence to ask questions in a constructive manner to clarify.

Focus on your past successes. What made you succeed? How have you adapted to prior changes? What tools helped you adapt to change in the past? Can you think of a situation where you were initially disappointed by a change but were pleasantly surprised after a period of adjustment?

You have adapted and succeeded in the past. You can and you will again. Change is inevitable and it is up to you to decide to accept, adapt and succeed.

Reach Out Initiative: Asking Why

Questioning the status quo can create conflict. Yet, asking the question why in a constructive manner can lead to ideas that reinforce our core values and building upon our strategic Reach Out Initiatives.

Conflict can indeed be productive. Many articles in this collection provide suggestions on how we can utilize conflict to our advantage.

Like most large organizations, universities can benefit from change. Change can provide new and better paths to reach our goals, strengthen our academic offerings, and offer new Reach Out Initiatives that further align with our vision. The impact of change may not show positive results in the short term, but in time can prove its value.

We sometimes overlook opportunities to improve the way we do our work. If we are comfortable with the way things are, we may see no need to make changes.

New staff and faculty can often observe and provide a different perspective unburdened by the inertia of the past. Those of us who have been here longer may

have overlooked what newer arrivals see. But all of us should be encouraged to take the "risk" of questioning why things are done a certain way, especially when we see new ways to get work done in a more efficient and productive manner. Disruptive thinking, mostly defined as asking "why" and "is there another way," is a thought process that at times takes us outside of our comfort zone yet is critical for the greater success of the organization.

I am sometimes approached by staff and/or faculty who have ideas that are disruptive yet potentially beneficial to Bentley. Our values allow us to feel empowered to reach out to the appropriate individuals to present ideas even if we believe that our suggestions will not ultimately be adopted. If the ideas are not welcomed at the time, a compromise may be to pilot the idea for a limited period, a less risky commitment.

During uncertain times, it is not easy to express our disruptive thinking. But if done in a constructive manner, we can overcome the fear of risk to our professional security.

What existing plans can be accomplished in better ways with different processes? Can the potential benefits of change outweigh the potential risks? How can we question the status quo in a constructive and collaborative manner? Below are some steps to consider:

- Be clear on what it is you want changed.
- Make sure you have comprehensive information on the potential benefits and risks of the change. In other words, do your homework.
- Share your idea with colleagues and get their thoughts.
- Have a specific implementation plan including success metrics.
- Present your idea to the appropriate individuals.

Constructive Feedback

The people that helped me the most in my career were the people I did not necessarily like!

As I reflect on my career of close to 40 years, I realize how some of the people that helped me the most were the people I enjoyed the least.

During my first few years in business, as a young executive armed with an MBA, I regret to say that I acted entitled, a bit arrogant, and was not yet mature or confident enough to accept constructive feedback. This was probably because I had been a great employee, always exceeding expectations and receiving great performance reviews. So, when I heard, but didn't listen to feedback that was constructive but not so flattering, my ego got in the way. Sometimes the feedback was not always presented in the most helpful and proper manner. It was occasionally expressed in a quite destructive and negative way.

At times, constructive feedback is indeed overrated. That statement is especially true when you are young and lack the confidence that only comes with time, experience and accomplishment.

Looking back, however, I could have put my ego aside, listened more carefully, and asked questions for clarification. I should have thanked the person for the time taken to give me the feedback. Although painful to hear, I know now that time has healed my bruised ego. That feedback has turned out to be very helpful in my later years.

If I had one message to share, it would be to encourage people to request colleagues and mentors who they trust and respect to provide them with frequent feedback in a helpful and positive manner. Having said all that, compliments and positive reinforcement remain extremely valuable and often not rated highly enough.

Reach Out Initiative: Requesting Constructive Feedback

In a 2014 study conducted by Harvard Business Review, 57% of participants stated that they preferred constructive feedback over praise (43%). This suggests that most employees want to know what they can do to improve their performance. I even go further and state that managers also want and can benefit from constructive feedback from their employees. This is something that most of us do not dare do!

In my five-plus years at Bentley as the University Ombuds, I have had some great conversations. I realized that we admire and respect our colleagues, our peers and our managers. Yet, we are unwilling to give them a gift: the gift of constructive feedback.

> "People believe constructive criticism is essential to their career development. They want it from leaders. But their leaders often don't feel comfortable offering it up. From this we conclude that the ability to give corrective feedback constructively is one of the critical keys to leadership, an essential skill to boost your team's performance that could set you apart."
>
> — Jack Zenger and Joseph Folkman, HBR

One of the most important aspects of giving constructive feedback is the way we present the feedback. It should be presented:

- in a sincere way
- as a gift to help the other person
- using specific examples of situations
- at the right time
- face-to-face in a one-on-one meeting
- after requesting and receiving permission to provide it.

At the end, we should ask the person receiving the feedback to, in turn, provide us with constructive feedback. If you are the manager who just gave the feedback, I encourage you to give permission to your employee to provide you with constructive feedback, as well.

The beginning of the calendar year is a perfect time – but not the only time! – to seek areas of improvement. I challenge us to reach out to a colleague, an employee, a manager or anyone else to request constructive feedback. Many of us want to give such feedback and want to help. Your reaching out will give us the permission to do so.

If I can help you see the value of giving or getting feedback, it will be my pleasure to do so.

Adapting to Forces Beyond our Control

We all know that there will be times in our lives when we confront forces and events that we cannot control. Such forces include natural disasters such as wildfires, earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, blizzards, and yes, epidemics and pandemics. They will disrupt the way we live and work. They may take us away from the office for an indeterminate amount of time where we have little or no physical contact with colleagues. Once we reunite again, managers and employees may have concerns about the face-to-face reunification.

When disaster strikes and isolates us in our work life, we miss personal interactions and collaboration with our colleagues. We miss the personal conversations around the water cooler and during coffee breaks and over lunch. We miss seeing each other on campus. But it is complicated. During the recent lockdown many of us found an independence not experienced before. We enjoyed the ability to control our work schedules. We may have enjoyed the no-traffic "commute" to our home office. We became accustomed to our ability to focus on our work with less interruptions than in our Bentley office. We found more quiet time to reflect and think of creative solutions and new initiatives. At the same time, we no longer took many things for granted.

But physical separation is a mixed blessing. It presents obstacles to a return to what had been the normal order.

When the disaster ends, a transition period begins when people start to adjust to a return to the office and resume personal meetings with colleagues and within groups. To assist with the transition, retreats may be helpful. The Ombuds office has had experience facilitating such meetings. Here is a list of proposed questions that may be useful in that effort.

The first set of questions listed below 1-5 are ice breakers and then the focus turns to mission and goals:

1. What have we missed during the recent physical separation? What have we enjoyed during that period?
2. Please share a favorite email you received or an experience you feel especially good about that made your day.
3. Have you become aware of anything new while working from home, or were you surprised about something that you did not expect while working from home?

4. Do you have any concerns about returning to campus and working in the same manner prior to the disaster which caused personal separation?
5. Is there anything you would like to share with your team members?
6. What have we done well as a team?
7. What can we do better as a team?
8. Do we understand the role each of us plays and how we perform our respective responsibilities?
9. What other new initiatives and programs should we consider for the group?
10. Are there any programs or projects that need to be reevaluated?
11. What should be our new normal as we adjust to a return to campus?
12. What initiatives will help us become more motivated and more productive?

Major disruptions to the way we work present obstacles to our ability to function well in our jobs, especially in the short term. In the longer term, I have heard encouraging comments that reflect how much more resilient individuals feel as a result of adapting to a disaster. Please know that there are many resources available to help us readjust. They include our Office Employee Assistance Program (EAP), Department Chairs, your manager, Human Resources and the Ombuds.

Reach Out Initiative: Collaborating in a Hybrid World

The last several years have motivated many of us to be more creative in finding new ways to achieve our goals. Strengthened by our Bentley values, we are fortunate to have a solid infrastructure and the resources to help us overcome obstacles before us and move forward with our vision.

I had the pleasure of observing effective collaboration among members of our community. They helped each other adapt to innovative approaches to ease the stress of these challenging times. They shared their concern and provided support to each other. They proposed new ways to address and resolve new challenges.

> "If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together."
>
> — African proverb

Some colleagues may hesitate to bring forward new ideas or propose new solutions. They may suspect that the extra work required to implement their proposals will not be appreciated or adequately recognized. Perhaps in these unstable times, they fear the consequences of increasing their visibility.

Surely, there are Reach Out Initiatives or projects that if properly implemented will enable departments across our Bentley community to operate more smoothly, effectively, and collaboratively in these stressful times.

The benefits to collaboration are many. It fosters community and team building when people get together, even if virtually, from diverse departments and groups. It gives participants the opportunity to learn from each other and appreciate different perspectives that will expedite solutions to pressing problems. It increases morale and allows us to think longer term. It also gives us a sense of empowerment to learn new tools and to adapt to a new "normal."

My hope is that this Reach Out Initiative will encourage us to initiate collaboration with our colleagues when the opportunity arises.

The Good, the Better and the Best Manager

For those who remember the movie, yes, I did get the idea for the title from Clint Eastwood's movie *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*.

A message I walked away with after seeing the movie is that we all have the capability to do the moral and right thing or not to. The decision to lean one way or the other may significantly depend on our work environment. Our managers and leaders play a key role in determining that environment.

Managers focus on accomplishing a combination of related goals with the support of a team of employees. Good managers possess many qualities such as knowledge, communication skills, respect, ability to delegate, honesty, creativity, empathy and commitment to success. But not all managers need to have leadership skills to succeed. It depends very much on the culture of the organization and the expectations of its leaders.

Having said that, the best managers also have leadership skills. Leadership skills allow them to understand the vision of the organization and appreciate their role within the organization, motivate and empower employees to do their best in contributing to the success of the entire organization's vision while accomplishing their team's goals and objectives.

The most critical skills for leaders to have include the ability to gain respect, communicate effectively, encourage collaboration, allow employees to learn from mistakes, and empowering them to personal and organizational excellence.

Exercise: Improving Teamwork

As a neutral Ombuds, I am often asked to facilitate a team meeting. That usually indicates that the team may need some help in becoming more collaborative, effective, productive or motivated. It also could reflect an unresolved conflict that needs to be addressed.

My first task when meeting a team for the first time is to create a comfortable environment that allows all the members the opportunity to voice what makes a "good" and "effective" team in their eyes. Although we know what makes a good team, the challenge is how to put into practice what we already know.

For example, we know that open and honest communication within the team is critical for its success. Here are some other factors important to a team's success:

1. Strong leadership
2. Appreciation of and commitment to the mission of the team

3. Taking calculated risks

4. Accountability for actions taken

5. Accepting mistakes as teaching moments

6. Celebrating milestones reached

7. Trusting fellow team members

Team exercises can be conducted to highlight the importance of the above mentioned factors for team success. One such exercise, described in this article, touches mainly on open and honest communication and includes an evaluation of oneself and the team. A follow-on action plan, described toward the end of this article, applies the findings of the exercise to help the team members achieve their own goals and the goals of the group in a more collaborative and effective manner.

The duration of this exercise is a function of the number of team members. The exercise is performed in two parts and can be done in person or online. The online exercise has been created due to the 2020 pandemic.

Each team member receives index cards called Feedback Cards via email. All team members will have Feedback Cards with their own name on them as well as the names of other team members. The total number of cards received should be the total number of individuals in the team.

In the first part of the exercise, each team member is asked to complete the following sentence on the card with his/her/their own name:

One of my biggest assets is:

One area I would like to improve in is:

I enjoy my job because:

In the second part of the exercise, each team member is asked to complete the following statements on the card of each of the other team members:

As a colleague, I appreciate that you… because it helps our team… because it helps me…

As a colleague, I prefer you do not… or do less of… because…

If the exercise is conducted in person, cards from all team members who have completed the second part are given to the Ombuds. The team members are asked to hold on to their individual cards that they completed for the first part of the exercise.

Team members are then asked to share their responses about themselves from the first part of the exercise. Then the Ombuds anonymously reads out loud the comments reflecting the behavior appreciated by other colleagues, namely the positive feedback.

If all team members agree, the constructive feedback portion of part two may be shared anonymously and openly with everyone. The authors of both positive and constructive feedback are anonymous. No member will know who provided the specific comments on the feedback cards.

If any team member prefers, the Ombuds can hold onto that team member's constructive feedback card until the individual requests it. But one should not wait too long. The best time for an individual to receive constructive feedback is when that individual feels good about a recent accomplishment or strong and humble enough to receive it. Even if the individual does not agree with the comments, perception could often be reality to many.

No matter how prepared or how strong one feels, constructive feedback may not be appreciated and even cause some resentment. But that is not unusual. Resentment will gradually and hopefully translate into action. I have experienced situations where those who have resented constructive feedback at first have later come around to appreciate such feedback as a valuable gift.

The exercise described above plays a critical step in creating a landscape for greater understanding, collaboration and trust among team members. It will motivate team members to be more engaged and eager to play a role in making a stronger, more effective team.

The recommended follow up activity, described below with questions to be answered, applies the findings of the exercise and focuses on specific actions each team member can take to improve themself, to help each team member and to help the goals of the group. The questions to be answered in this phase include:

- What can you do to address your desire to improve in the area you mentioned?
- How can you play a role in helping other team members address their area of improvement?
- Can you consider collaborating with another team member to be more effective in addressing that team member's desired areas of improvement?
- How will your collaboration and ideas help your team members, yourself and the overall goals of your group?
- Should we eliminate any existing goals?
- Should we include new goals for our group and mission?

Please remember this is a process, and it may take a few weeks or months to see significant results. The small steps and small successes will lead to bigger successes.

Reach Out Initiative: Addressing Micromanagement

An excellent way to motivate employees is to give them the confidence to perform at their best. One way to boost employee confidence is to allow them to address an issue or perform a task the way they want, which could be different from what a manager wants. A good leader, however, will accept the employee's approach as long as the desired outcome is achieved.

As Ombuds, I have had conversations with managers and employees focused on the issue of micromanagement. My sense from those conversations is that managers do not enjoy micromanaging employees any more than employees enjoy being micromanaged.

I hear mostly from employees. They tell me that they feel unmotivated, discouraged and lose confidence in their ability to complete assigned tasks successfully. But they feel uncomfortable discussing micromanagement with their managers. They tell me that they do not believe that their manager will change behavior and they do not want to take the risk of offending them.

This Reach Out Initiative is to encourage employees who feel micromanaged to address the issue directly with their managers. If you accept the premise that most managers prefer not to micromanage, you should feel empowered to let them know how it affects you.

One constructive way to address this issue is to ask your manager if it would be possible not to provide too much detail for an assignment, but instead give the desired outcome. If you need more information or context, you will ask your manager as needed. You can commit to them that you will keep them posted of your progress. You should still let your manager know how much you appreciate their desire to have you succeed but that you would be more motivated and productive if you were given more flexibility on how to complete the assigned task. You can also add that it would help with your confidence and professional development.

Reach Out Initiative: Offering to Help, Asking for Help

Virtually every person has a strong desire to help someone.

> "The only mistake you can make is not asking for help."
>
> — Sandeep Jauhar, MD and author

This Reach Out Initiative centering on help reflects a Bentley core value that most of us practice on a regular basis.

I know many of us have reached out to someone to offer help. We may have experienced many benefits in helping others.

> "We can't help everyone, but everyone can help someone."
>
> — President Ronald Reagan

Many of us have also reached out to ask for help. In general, and perhaps prior to the pandemic, asking for help was a sign of strength. After all the world has been through in the past several years, I might assert that asking for help is a not only a sign of strength but also a sign of self-confidence. It allows us to express our desire to remain strong and to succeed.

I hope this will motivate us to reach out to someone to ask for help and to also reach out to offer help when we can. I look forward to helping you in any way I can and asking for help when needed.

Reach Out Initiative: Giving Compliments

Giving compliments is needed to foster a positive environment. It can have a particularly positive impact in addressing and resolving conflicts if done in a sincere, constructive, and timely manner.

Compliments make us feel successful, appreciated and more confident. They can also reduce stress, as well as build or rebuild trust. One can even argue that compliments can give us a level of confidence that enhances relationships which, in turn, can go a long way in addressing potential conflicts before they escalate. Giving a compliment benefits not only the receiver but the giver just as much.

As Ombuds, I speak with colleagues facing a conflict or anticipating one with another individual, whom I'll call "Individual X." After validating their concern and, depending upon the situation, I consider asking this question: Did Individual X do anything in the past that you appreciated? Close to 100% of the time, I get an answer in the affirmative. Yet they often admit not expressing appreciation or having given the compliment that would have been well deserved.

This Reach Out Initiative encourages us to reach out to give a compliment when deserved.

The most important aspect of a compliment is that it needs to be sincere, timely and specific. It could be as simple as expressing appreciation for a colleague's support during a meeting or expressing admiration for a task well done. For example, Individual X could have managed a project very well, collaborated to make the project extraordinarily successful, or just dealt with difficult challenges very professionally.

A few of the most appreciated compliments from a colleague are:

"You are a very valuable team member. I could not have done this without your help."

"You gave a great presentation."

"I admire your drive and your willingness to jump into new areas to help others."

"I appreciated your willingness to listen to my concern and your help in addressing it."

"I enjoy working with you. You have great ideas and add a lot to our team."

Wishing you all the best and hope you will soon be giving as well as receiving more compliments.

Reach Out Initiative: Learning to be Humble

To be humble is a great attribute to have. It can play a key role in addressing and resolving a conflict.

Demonstrating humility also touches on many of our core values including learning, respect, caring, collaboration and impact.

The simple definition of a humble person is one who is not arrogant, but modest.

Humble people underestimate their own importance and value others' contributions and strengths as much as or even more than their own.

Humble people do not let their egos get in the way. They often view change as an opportunity to gain experience.

Humble people tend to collaborate more, have open minds, learn from others and admit their mistakes as valuable teaching moments.

Humble people can have a profound impact on others. They build trust. They criticize constructively with the intention of caring and helping others.

Humble people display a quiet confidence and are secure enough not to "brag" about their accomplishments and importance. They focus more on learning from others and empower others to succeed.

As the Ombuds, I see humbleness as:

- Realizing we are not always right, and we all can make mistakes.
- Knowing how to apologize and to be sincere.
- Being eager to collaborate to resolve a conflict and to work for the benefit of others more than just for a selfish benefit.
- Seeing a conflict or a challenging situation as a teaching moment.
- Listening actively and asking questions to better understand the other person's views.
- Keeping an open mind and avoiding making unwarranted assumptions.

I encourage us all to be humble especially when faced with a potential conflict.

Reach Out Initiative: Sharing Your Outside Interests

It is my experience that we may be more willing to address a conflict or may be more open to express our concern with someone who shares a similar interest.

> "For the longest time, I was annoyed at a colleague who always expressed the need to quantify all success metrics, something that I used to see as delaying progress with our projects. I am now glad I learned of his passion to teach children math. It made me less impatient with him and more accepting of his desire to quantify everything!"
>
> — Anonymous former colleague

Reach Out to Share Your Outside Interests aligns with the belief that knowing something more about our colleagues will help us better understand them.

This may result in greater trust, collaboration, productivity and satisfaction.

Reach Out Initiative: Sharing your Nonprofit Work

What does volunteering for or joining a nonprofit board have to do with Bentley University?

Furthermore, what is the relationship between affiliating oneself with a nonprofit and our ability to address conflict in a constructive way?

Volunteering for a cause we are passionate about, whether it relates to hunger, health, religion, animals, the environment, art, the elderly, the disadvantaged or many other great causes, demonstrates many of Bentley's core values, impact care, collaboration and compassion.

We know that volunteering stimulates empathy in us and makes us feel good about helping others. It also improves our sense of wellbeing, increases our self-confidence, reduces stress, and facilitates new and meaningful connections.

> "Volunteering is good for your career. Volunteering is a wonderful way to get real-world experience in your chosen field, make professional connections within your industry, and looks fantastic on a résumé. Volunteering boosts your mental health. One of the best reasons to volunteer for a nonprofit is its effect on your mental wellbeing. Studies show that people who volunteer report feeling happier and less anxious than their peers."
>
> — handsonmaui.com

With respect to the second question, a reinforced sense of empathy, wellbeing and self-confidence better equips us to handle conflict in a constructive manner. It will enable us to stand in the shoes of others to better understand the cause of conflict and how to best resolve it.

While some of us want to volunteer and be affiliated with certain causes, we may not know how to go about connecting with the appropriate nonprofits. Learning of the organizations and causes that interest our colleagues may help inspire and enable our involvement.

This Reach Out Initiative encourages all of us to share our nonprofit and charitable interests with our teams. Our passion and our involvement with nonprofits may resonate with the passions of those we feel we may have a conflict with or those we would like to better understand. Sharing a passion may be a first step in finding more common grounds.

Reach Out Initiative: Expressing Appreciation

It is my experience that many individuals greatly appreciate a compliment on a job well done or on any action that resulted in helping someone. They feel appreciated and are motivated and empowered to do "more" the next time. The person expressing appreciation benefits just as much, possibly more.

> "In positive psychology research, gratitude is strongly and consistently associated with greater happiness. Gratitude helps people feel more positive emotions, relish good experiences, improve their health, deal with adversity, and build strong relationships."
>
> — Giving Thanks Can Make You Happier, Harvard Health Publishing

It is also my experience that many of us want to give such compliments and express appreciation but somehow, we get sidetracked with our busy schedule and many times forget to do so.

Harvard Health Publishing in collaboration with the Harvard Medical School posted an article entitled "Giving Thanks Can Make You Happier."

I wish each one of you continued success.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eliane Markoff brings to Bentley experience from both business and the academic worlds. She spent 20 years working for a Fortune 500 high tech company managing work forces in the U.S. and Europe. She also held positions in manufacturing, research and development and marketing.

Markoff lent her considerable listening and mediation skills as an unofficial ombudsperson to build bridges among corporate divisions and individuals who needed to collaborate to be successful. With a high emotional IQ, she brought creative solutions to workplace conflicts. She has mediated shareholder disputes within close corporations and conflicts among family members over will and estate contests.

Markoff was an adjunct professor at Bentley University teaching organizational behavior and conflict resolution to both undergraduate and graduate students. Prior to rejoining Bentley as Ombuds in 2018, she launched the Ombuds Office at Wheelock College after serving on its board of trustees for six years.

She is one of the 125 women to appear in Inspirational Women of Boston by The Boston Globe's Bill Brett. She is one of the Wellesley residents honored in 2012 by the Wellesley Free Library Foundation as an individual who has had an impact within and beyond the Wellesley community. Markoff was also honored in 2011 with the Giving Back Award by Women Entrepreneurs in Science and Technology (WEST). She is co-founder of the gallery Art in Giving.

Markoff received her mediation training from the Cambridge Dispute Resolution and the Boston Law Collaborative. She is fluent in French and Arabic and earned her MBA from Boston College and her BA in Economics from the University of Massachusetts in Amherst.

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