"Building trust and conflict in a technical team"
Elizabeth O'Neill, Head of Technical Projects and Change, Charities Aid Foundation

"If you take only one thing away from this talk," said Elizabeth O'Neill, head of technical projects and change at CAF, "it is this: when you are talking to somebody, put away your technology. Because nothing says to someone 'I am not interested in you' more than playing on your phone while you're talking to them."

Despite her job title, Elizabeth confessed at the outset of her speech to the conference that she hasn't much interest in "projects", but she recognised that "they are the mechanisms by which change happens". The challenge for organisations, she asserted, is how to build the teams that can embrace and deliver change, adding: "It is our responsibility as leaders to ensure the teams we manage are high-performing teams full of happy, motivated and fulfilled people. And this is not just because it's a nice fluffy thing to do, it's because there is loads of evidence pointing to the fact that happy teams are more productive and add more to the bottom line."

Building trust

O'Neill believes there are two ingredients to creating high-performing teams: trust, and positive conflict. Taking each in turn, she first drew on Harvard professor Frances Frei's model of the three things that contribute to trust in the workplace: authenticity, logic and empathy. "If any of these are wobbly or out of sync, trust breaks down," she said.

Empathy is the most important quality to demonstrate, because if people don't feel they are being given proper time and attention, their attention and commitment will drift and this will engender a cycle of negative behaviour by all parties. In order to show empathy, O'Neill advises, colleagues and bosses should physically look up at others in meetings, truly listen to what others have to say (instead of simply waiting for your turn to speak) and ask questions of them once they've finished. And, of course - put your phones away.

Using logic is not generally a problem in itself; the problem is usually communicating it, O'Neill went on. There are two styles of communicating: the storytelling method, which builds a narrative using detail and drama before finally getting to the point, or an alternative method where you state your key point at the outset and then back it up with evidence. It's generally best to communicate logic using the second method, Elizabeth said.

She used a personal anecdote to illustrate the point, quipping: "I have an amazing boss, but he loves war analogies, and I can never figure out if I'm the army or the navy.

"So if you have a logic wobble, maybe try the second style."

The last quality is authenticity, and this is particularly important for leaders as charities build more diverse workforces, where members of the same teams may not share the same opinions, experiences or even values.

"Being authentic should be easy, right? All you've got to do is be you. But when you're in a group of diverse people, which is what we want, it is much harder to be you. It's hard because most organisations value fitting in. Most organisations tend to reward people for saying what they want to hear, how they want to hear it," she said.

"But if I, as a senior leader with 20 years' experience within technology, think that it's hard, imagine how a junior member of the team feels - somebody who is maybe the only person who is different; the only woman, the only person of different ethnicity, the only LGBT person, or even just the shy person. Imagine how hard it is for them if they can't stand up and be who they are.

"So you need to value different views, to welcome people standing up and challenging you. Don't say what you think people want to hear, say what your true self needs to say to stay authentic. Value individuality in your teams, value differences. Hire people that are different to you because it's only by having that difference and allowing it to have a voice will people be able to be authentic. Only by being authentic ourselves are we able to encourage others to be authentic. And if you are unauthentic, your teams will be able to tell, and they will not trust you.

"You need to make sure your words match your actions, and your actions match your words."

Positive conflict

The other key ingredient in a high-performing team is positive conflict, O'Neill said.

"That is not to say that conflict itself is positive, but the outcome of the conflict was positive – that we got to a better place because the conflict happened."

She said conflict "builds better ideas, leads to better decision-making, and allows people to solve problems in a different way because you don't get groupthink. If there is no conflict within your team, the likelihood is that you are not making the best decisions that you can make – because you are not debating properly and not challenging each other and not looking at things from different points of view."

Psychological safety

However, in order to allow positive conflict to flourish within teams, people need to feel they have "psychological safety". This is defined as a "shared belief held by all team members that it is safe within the team to take interpersonal risks".

"What that means in practice is that nobody is going to argue with you as CTO or IT director unless they feel it is safe to do so. It means that members of the team feel safe to ask questions and challenge one another."

O'Neill argued that embedding psychological safety is more important in the charity sector than anywhere else, as charities cannot afford to waste money because nobody felt brave enough to challenge what everyone could see was a terrible idea.

She shared some advice for how to build psychological safety within teams:

- Break the golden rule: don't treat people how *you* would like to be treated, treat them how *they* want to treated. And if you don't know what that is, ask them.
- Welcome curiosity and challenge
- Share errors and failures – take mistakes out of the shadows and build a culture where it is ok to mess up
- Give everyone a voice – ditch the chain of command
- Speak human to human – don't send someone an email when they sit two desks away from you

- Remember that your teammate is not usually trying to be an idiot, or difficult – and that they have fears and anxieties just like you

So, in summary, letting positive conflict flourish is a good thing, but it's useful to lay down some ground rules:

- People should not interrupt each other
- Leaders should be proactive at managing conflict as soon as it arises, or it can escalate
- Leaders should model behaviours and "bake in" good processes
- Leaders should encourage humour – in fact, make yourself the butt of it.

"The reality is that without trust and positive conflict, all you have is a set of individuals," O'Neill concluded. "Without these two things, in my humble opinion, you will never have a high-performing team."