

Management 5000

[Business](#), [Leadership](#)



Management 5000 2012 Managing Team Conflict FINAL PAPER management 5000 Table of Contents * Describe the nature of conflict in teams * Define types of conflict and describe how each manifests in a team * Identify reasons why team members struggle with conflict * Describe how a team leader can manage conflict within the team * Summarize my key learning, with recommendation for an intervention that may work in a group conflict situation

Introduction It is commonplace for organizations today to work in teams. Whether they be leader-driven teams or self-directed teams; the hope is that productivity, creativity, and results will be greater in a team environment. While this is a proven approach, any time you bring together people from differing backgrounds and experiences, it is inevitable that conflict will occur. Many people and organizations view conflict as a negative, or something to be avoided. Yet conflict, differences, or disagreements are a natural result of people working together. Also, without conflict, teams can become complacent and not perform at optimum levels. The challenge then becomes, how should the team be prepared for this stage of their existence, and how should the team leader facilitate through it?

Types of Conflict " Conflict arises from the clash of perceptions, goals, or values in an arena where people care about the outcome" (Alessandra, 1993) if the management of that conflict is not effective, it can totally disrupt the entire group process. However the old saying " that which does not kill us will make us stronger" illustrates how successfully managed conflict can benefit the group. The paragraph above illustrates why conflict is often termed either functional or dysfunctional. Functional conflict is at a level that enables a group to maximize its performance, and the outcomes are

desirable. However; when that conflict escalates to a level that disrupts the group and gets in the way of accomplishing its goals, then it has become dysfunctional. Managing that balance is the key to effective groups. Another way to categorize conflict is by focusing on its origin. How the conflict has evolved is clearly an indicator of whether it will help or hinder the group process. Some common sources of group conflict are listed in Capozzoli (1995) and Alessandra (1993):

- * Values of team members
- * Attitudes of team members
- * Goals/Expectations - the processes and expected outcomes
- * Roles and responsibilities of team members
- * Limited resources
- * Personalities
- * Interdependency
- * Increased interaction (frequency)

Allen C. Amason, of Mississippi State University, has studied conflict and its role in decision-making. He suggests there are two types of conflict: (These actually trace back to the sources listed above.)

- Cognitive - conflict aimed at issues, ideas, principles, or process
- Affective - conflict aimed at people, emotions, or values

His studies showed the presence of both types in any group setting; but he's clear to explain that cognitive conflict is constructive, while affective is destructive (Brockmann, 1996). Another researcher, Thomas K. Capozzoli (1995), reinforces this by describing the outcomes of constructive and destructive conflict:

Constructive conflicts exist when...

1. People change and grow personally from the conflict
2. The conflict results in a solution to a problem
3. It increase involvement of everyone affected by the conflict
4. It builds cohesiveness among the members of the team

Destructive conflicts exist when...

1. No decision is reached and problem still exists
2. It diverts energy away from more value-add activities
3. It destroys the morale of the team members
4. It polarizes or divides the team

As mentioned above,

teams are a powerful force in organizations. They are assembled to tackle complex and strategic issues within a company. Often the membership is a select group of people from different departments, each with special skills or talents to solve a particular problem. However; what is often lacking is training in the core competencies of working on a team. " In order for a team to be successful, it is essential that members know the basics of conflict resolution, delegation, and consensus building" (Convey, 1994). Without these skills, each member must rely on whatever they've learned on their own, or the facilitator's skills in moving the team through these struggles. This is not an ideal way to manage teams, and reduces the synergistic benefits of team-based activities. Every organization or group should develop a strategy for training and preparing team members for group process. One example that I found to be a good model was from an initiative at UALR University. It involved the Student Life organization -the Program Director, the staff, the administration, and the students. They used training to proactively manage conflict, and the results were positive. Here's a brief overview of the training phases they used: Stage 1 - Conflict resolution awareness- overview, examples, stimulated need to change and learn. Stage 2 - Conflict resolution training- workshops to learn skills and techniques for managing situations of conflict. Stage 3 - Mediation Training- aimed at selected leaders of each segment of the population that would become certified mediators, and provide future support. Stage 4 - Reinforcement workshops- informal sessions to perpetuate the concepts and continue improving people's awareness and ability to manage conflict. Stage 5 - Institutionalization of the program- assignment of the on-going support,

maintenance, and mediation services to specific organization. I think UALR project has three key ingredients that should be a part of any group skills training. First, it trains everyone- group members and group leaders. Without that, you have not given everyone the tools to help the process. Second, it focuses on what conflict is, and how to manage it. This gives the participants some skills to not only recognize conflict, but to also take action. Lastly, it has reinforcement built in. These are not easy skills to learn, so continual repetition is critical to truly internalizing them.

Team Leader's Role in Managing Conflict " Conflicts are part of individual relationships and organizational development, and no relationship or organization can hope to mature to productivity and be successful without being able to resolve conflicts effectively" (Cottringer, 1997,) Clearly, one of the main responsibilities of any manager or group leader is to resolve conflict. The two key goals for a group leader are to remain impartial, and to facilitate understanding among the group members. " As a team leader, one must realize the paradox that surrounds conflict. The team needs to embrace conflict as a means of generating and evaluating ideas. While at the same time, it must shy away from it to prevent anger, frustration, or alienation. The biggest challenge for the team leader is figuring out how to balance these two forces" (Brockmann, 1996, p. 61).

Preventative Strategies The first step in conflict management is learning how to prevent or minimize conflict. A team leader has several ways to do that. Here are just a few: (Parker, 1994) at the beginning of each project, or each meeting, ground rules should be developed. These should incorporate processes or behaviors that the group will allow or prohibit. Ground rules can be useful because as conflict

arises, the leader can refer the team back to them for guidance. These tend to be good objective guidelines that remove the leader from the role of enforcer. Another technique is to develop a team agreement on how the group will resolve conflict if it does occur. This gets them to focus on good resolution behaviors, and prepares the team with a process that is available if necessary. As mentioned previously, training in conflict resolution or communication skills would be invaluable to a team. It would be preferable if the team could attend this training as a group. Finally, it is important to focus on goals of the team early in the process. Often time's conflict arises from goal mis-alignment, and if this is uncovered and cleared up early, then it could minimize problems later. If new members are added to the team, then it would be beneficial to re-visit this exercise again.

Reactive Strategies

There are many ways for a team leader to facilitate the resolution of conflict. Every situation is different, and often a combination of techniques is required. Here are a few examples of theories or suggestions that I found interesting, conflict, strategy, definition, execution techniques.

Acting

exercising an authoritarian approach, simply tell the group what the resolution will be. Resolves it quickly and without discussion. Emergency situations or when emotions are high and issues will require widespread unpopular decisions. Think through any expected negative fallout ahead of time and have a contingency plan. Tell people calmly and directly what you are going to do- no hesitation or confusion.

Adjusting

Splitting differences, exchanging concessions, or give and take to reach a middle ground. Good when a quick, temporary solution is needed for a complex issue. It merges very different opinions or perspectives quickly. Often a third party mediator

is effective negotiating the gives and takes of all parties. End the mediation by summarizing, gaining commitments, and setting up future check points in the plan. Accommodating sacrificing self concerns in yielding to another person. Most valuable when one person has more vested in the outcome, when one person is wrong, or when there may be more to gain later. Requires getting one person to see their wrong, either through proof or humor. Need to separate thoughts from feelings, and clearly identify how one person's giving in is right, beneficial, and thank them for it. Avoiding Withdrawing, sidestepping or postponing the issue. Most effective when importance of issue is low, when the conflict is a symptom of a bigger issue, or when time alone will bring about a natural outcome. Good question here- what if I do nothing- what's the worst that could happen? Always explain why you are not doing anything-let them know that it is meant for a time out or cool off, and when you expect to deal with the issue. Many researchers of conflict resolution suggest using a step-by-step process. This enables the leader to follow a systematic approach to resolving a conflict. Comparing this type of approach to the one in the last section, I believe this method would take more time. However; if that time is available, it might be a more effective method. In fact, it may be useful after one of the other strategies is used to fix the immediate situation. Here is a summary of the various step-by-step theories I found in my research: STEP BY STEP PROCESS 1. Set up an environment that all parties know the goal is to resolve 2. Make sure all parties want to resolve it 3. All parties must accept the conflict as a mutual problem- not win/lose 4. Explore the reasons for the conflict 5. Generate solution options 6. Involved parties must agree on which solution is most

appropriate 7. Implement the selected solution 8. Evaluate the success/failure of the solution 9. Celebrate or go back to #6 I chose this topic because as a team leader, I am constantly faced with conflicts, large and small, within the groups I manage. However, I was raised without much conflict, so as a result I have a tendency to avoid it. As my research pointed out, this could get in my way of being an effective leader. My goal in doing this research was to learn and equip myself with some knowledge to be effective at conflict management. I think I accomplished my goal! In my teams, I see the two main causes of conflict to be interdependence among team members, and inconsistent goals. The interdependence is the hardest for me to manage. In fact, this theory really made sense to me, as I thought about growing up. I never experienced much conflict as a child, and I think it was because as an only child, my parents and I were very independent. In a different family structure, one with several children, I can see where the interdependence would cause conflict. I see that family as a team, and the interdependence as a natural extension of any team. The conflict management strategies that I think could help the interdependence conflict are ground rules, and a conflict resolution process. Also, some team building exercises that demonstrate how each team member has input to the final outcome. An example would be puzzle building exercises, where everyone has a piece, or any survival exercise that all members must live for the team to survive. Trust is also critical to this type of conflict, so any means of developing better trust levels within the group would also be effective here. One source I read noted that in conflict situations, team members will never trust each other, but they can be trained ahead of time to trust the conflict

resolution process. The second cause I want to be prepared for is the goal mis-alignment. I experience this frequently with my teams because most are cross-functional, and each organization they represent has different goals. As a result, each team member may approach our project with a different commitment, different timeline, or even with a hidden agenda of some type. I'm not sure this situation is preventable, but I think there are some ways to manage it. One absolute for me is going to be developing a "goal statement" at the beginning of the project. Also, as team members change, it will be reviewed and revisited. Having this will enable me to refer back to it when conflicts arise that are unrelated, or if the group slows down and is not moving toward the goal. One particular intervention I thought would be helpful during any stage of a project would be to review the original goal with the team, and then ask each team member to evaluate the team performance up to that point. Then take each of their comments and board them for group review. I believe this would surface some of the obstacles or frustrations that exist, and it would come from the team, not the team leader (I think it's more effective when the team identifies its own problems.) As a follow up, the team could brainstorm how to resolve each problem and develop an agreement to move ahead. Overall, it's clear to me now that conflict is a natural part of group work. It can be a tremendous source of creativity, and at the same time it can sidetrack a team. What makes the difference is having group members, and a group leader that understands and manages conflict effectively. References Brockmann, Erich. (1996, May). Removing the paradox of conflict from group decisions. *Academy of Management Executive*. Cappozzoli, Thomas K. (1995, Dec). Resolving

conflict within teams. Journal for Quality and Participation. v18n7, p. 28-30
Parker, Glenn M. (1994, Oct). Cross Functional Teams. Small Business Reports. v19n10, p 58-60.