

Managing and resolving conflict in a team



The process of identifying and resolving conflict is researched and documented. The topics researched were what conflict is, its causes, how it is managed, and how it impacts the workplace. Not all conflict is negative; conflict can be positive if resolved properly. The ideas or suggestions derived from conflict resolution can lead to creating new and productive processes. If managers are trained and aware of conflict management, conflict can bring out creativity and different points of view. The positive outcomes from conflict management can greatly assist the success of today's organizations.

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Introduction

When society hears the word conflict it usually brings to mind fighting, battles, or something destructive, but when we talk about conflict in the context of team dynamics it can be constructive as well as destructive. Conflict is actually a perceived divergence of interest (Pruitt, & Kim, 2004). Most conflict arises from beliefs or opinions not being recognized, clashing personalities, and receiving incorrect information. Office conflict “left unchecked can lead to mistakes, decreased efficiency and eventually lost revenue” (Resolving conflict in your practice, 2005).

When working with a group of people, it is important to let everyone involved share their opinions. Keeping the lines of communication open is critical. When one's beliefs or opinions are not shared by others, or discarded as meaningless, it creates tension and, in some cases, hostility. This can severely impact any environment because of the decreased efficiency. The worker will generally not put forth their best effort in cases like this. That can result in unnecessary overtime for a project to be completed.

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It has been stated that, “ conflict within organizations is inevitable, but without conflict there would be no creativity, and hence no innovation” (Whitworth, 2005). A small team setting fosters the overall creativity of a group, mostly due to the idea that the permission to criticize and debate an idea could encourage idea generation. Ideas that are seen as bad may be tweaked by other party members, or may be criticized in order to better establish what ends a group’s efforts are trying to achieve.

Whenever people unite to work as a team for anything more than a brief duration, some conflict is normal, and should be expected (Engleberg, Wynn & Schutter, 2003). Because of the inevitability of conflict, being able to recognize, address, and ultimately resolve it is vitally important, since unresolved conflict may have undesirable effects, including reduced morale, or increased turnover (De Janasz, Dowd & Schneider, 2001). Just as conflicts within team environments vary, so do methods for resolving it.

Understanding the various conflict resolution methods, including how and when to apply them, is of utmost importance. In teams, different types of conflict call for different solutions. Conflict resolution is certainly not an area in which one size fits all. The process of conflict resolution includes, determining the source of the conflict, choosing the right approach, and resolving the conflict. This paper will discuss conflict, the roles of communication and personality in negotiation, how they contribute and detract from negotiations and some management and resolution strategies as they relate to team dynamics will be discussed.

Sources of Conflict

Conflict may be classified as Substantive, Procedural, or Affective, depending upon that to which it relates. Substantive conflict refers to disagreement related to ideas or issues, while procedural conflict relates to disagreements about tasks, processes or methods to be used in pursuit of the team's goals (Engleberg, Wynn & Schutter, 2003). Procedural conflict may be beneficial, by promoting evaluation of the best course of action, and ensuring that all points of view are considered during the decision making process (Stuart, Sims, & Manz 1999). With affective conflict however, disagreement is more emotionally charged, relating to personalities, emotions and differing communication styles, making resolution more complex (Engleberg, Wynn & Schutter, 2003). Affective conflict is often destructive for teams, because it is relationship based, and may involve incompatibility between team members (Stuart, Sims, & Manz 1999).

Dealing with Conflict

Many associate conflict with negative experiences, such as stressful, heated exchanges, rather than positive opportunities to achieve clarity and cohesion among team members. Conflict refers to differences of opinion (Parker, 2003), or disharmony associated with seeming incompatibility of differences (Engleberg, Wynn & Schutter, 2003). These differences need not be harmful. The way the team handles conflict determines whether the outcome is constructive or destructive.

Constructive conflict refers to disagreements which are handled courteously and respectfully, in which teams work together, value member's contributions, and commit to finding solutions beneficial to everyone

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involved, both individually and as a group. Constructive conflict can be beneficial, encouraging members' interest and participation, personal growth, and ultimately, team cohesion (Engleberg, Wynn & Schutter, 2003). It can improve clarity with regard to key issues or values, and inspire increased creativity (De Janasz, Dowd & Schneider, 2001).

Destructive conflict occurs when members respond to disagreements disrespectfully. Persistent complaining, insults, competition, defensiveness, arguing, avoidance or inflexibility for example, create hostility, impairing the team's decision making ability and effectiveness. Negative effects of destructive conflict often include inability to resolve problems, diversion of energy from team objectives, and damaged morale, which can be divisive to the team (Capozzoli, 1999). Unresolved feelings may prevent members from successfully working together, ultimately rendering the team ineffective (De Janasz, Dowd & Schneider, 2001).

If conflict is left to simmer, it becomes much more difficult to resolve. When agreement areas are identified, people can work toward arriving at a consensus and develop a process for resolving problems in the future. Conflict, if not handled correctly can severely impact any working environment. It is important to note that " numerous studies show that workers spend between 20 and 35% of their time in interactions with colleagues" (Heerwagen et al, 2004, p. 514). These interactions can be planned or unplanned. Meeting in boardrooms or working together on projects is planned interaction. Most interactions are unplanned. It includes meetings in hallways, stairways, break rooms and parking garages. Whether

your interactions are planned or unplanned, it is important to be mindful of people at all times.

Styles of Conflict

As people tend to be creatures of habit, understandably, team members are likely to manage conflict in the style to which they are accustomed, rather than choosing the conflict management style appropriate for the specific conflict. Predictably, using a conflict management style inappropriate for the circumstance can have undesirable results. In the article titled Conflict and cohesion in groups, Engleberg, Wynn and Schutter discuss five typical conflict management styles (2003). A style must be determined in order to consider your approach. One of the most used methods suggests that individuals are more than likely to using one of the following five conflict styles: avoidance, accommodation, competition, compromise, and collaboration.

Avoidance describes ignoring, or refusing to address the problem. Avoidance is usually counterproductive, except when used to allow time to gather thoughts or composure, or when the benefits of addressing the issue do not justify the risk. Avoidance may be appropriate for managing affective conflict.

Accommodation refers to yielding to others at the expense of one's own goals, due to a belief that the team is best served by conceding, to preserve harmony. Accommodating deprives the team of the opportunity to benefit from exploring the matter further through discussion. It is appropriate when

preserving harmony within the team is more important than resolving the issue.

Competition, in contrast to avoidance or accommodation, refers to arguing between members who may be more interested in their own goals than in satisfying the needs of the team. This style of conflict management may damage relationships within the team, as it does not pursue a win-win solution, preferring instead, a win-lose outcome. Consequently, one might surmise that competition would never be an appropriate choice. In some circumstances however, when beliefs are extremely strong, when the team urgently needs to take action or when the potential exists for serious or harmful consequences of the decision, competition is appropriate.

Compromise refers to searching for middle ground, conceding some issues in order to prevail in others, ensuring fairness since everyone wins and loses equally. The members must give up on some of their points in order to gain much more for the benefit of the group. The group may win overall and this may seem as a perfect solution, but since each member had to give up something, then the loyalty and commitment of each individual may be a concern. The members may not be completely satisfied with the end result and should only be used when members cannot agree. Compromise may be appropriate when progress toward a solution has stalled and insufficient time remains to explore innovative solutions (Engleberg, Wynn & Schutter, 2003)

Another concern is that members preferring to compromise may fail to explore more creative options when conflict arises, thereby depriving the team of the opportunity to achieve higher quality solutions through

constructive conflict (Stuart, Sims, & Manz, 1999). Since no single conflict management style is effective in every situation, the style chosen should be specific to the conflict to be managed and the objectives of the team. The conflict in any given situation must be thoroughly analyzed and understood to determine which conflict resolution method is most appropriate.

The final style of conflict is collaboration. Collaboration pulls the groups resources and makes the group work together. Instead of arguing over whose solutions are right, the collaborative group looks for new solutions that satisfy everyone interest in the group. When a group tries more creative measures, the members can contribute more of their unique talents and expertise to resolving a conflict.

The drawbacks to collaboration are all group members must fully participate for a collaboration to be successful and it requires a lot of time and effort on the group. The group may not think the issue is important enough to even reach collaboration. When time is not a concern, the collaboration approach is most ideal. When collaborating, everyone in disagreement is able to come up with a solution to appease everyone. Collaboration can take a great deal of effort and time which is why in a group setting, members are not always able to accomplish this approach.

Conflict Methods

One managing method recommended by Engleberg, Wynn and Schutter for achieving clear understanding, is the 4 R's Method, in which each of the four steps is identified by a word beginning with the letter R (2003). Before reacting to the conflict, one must know each of the four R's:

Reasons for, or causes of the conflict must be explored through open, respectful conversation until thoroughly understood.

Reactions of team members must be evaluated to determine whether they are constructive or destructive, and if the latter, members must take appropriate steps to self correct, and to recommit to the team's goals and objectives.

Results or consequences of the team's current handling of the conflict must be evaluated, and the team must consider what might happen if the conflict remains unresolved, evaluating potential impact on morale, and determining if the conflict is serious enough to prevent the team from accomplishing its goals.

Resolution refers to the available methods for resolving the conflict. The team, finally having a thorough understanding of what the conflict is about, how they've managed it, and what may happen if it remains unresolved, determines the most appropriate method for constructively resolving it together (Porter, 2003). Once the conflict is understood, the team is better prepared to select a resolution method.

If using the 4 R's Method supports the conclusion that the most appropriate course of action is to settle differences through bargaining, the process of negotiation, usually involving compromise, should begin in pursuit of a solution. Four principles of effective negotiation include separating the people from the issue, focusing on team interests rather than member's positions, brainstorming to " generate a variety of possible solutions for mutual gain" (p. 11), and establishing objective criteria for choosing the best

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solution from those created while brainstorming (Engleberg, Wynn & Schutter, 2003).

Conflict Resolution Approaches

The conflict resolution methods discussed by Engleberg, Wynn and Schutter, 2003, include Wisinski's AEIOU Model, negotiation, mediation and arbitration. Wisinski's AEIOU Model is recommended when the understanding of the conflict supports the decision to express concerns, and suggest a course of action. This method enables groups to understand fully the concerns of individual team members, in pursuing solutions to resolve the conflict (Engleberg, Wynn & Schutter, 2003).

Each vowel represents a part of the process, " Assume the other members mean well...Express your feelings... Identify what you would like to happen... Outcomes you expect are made clear... Understanding on a mutual basis is achieved" (p. 10). This method helps individual members communicate concerns clearly, using a supportive and productive approach, since the problem must be fully understood before the team can effectively pursue an appropriate solution. Once the matter is fully understood by all participants, through clear communication, the team is better prepared to resolve it together (2003).

After each member of the team decides on an answer to each of the process steps in the " A-E-I-O-U Model, and has a good idea of what accommodations can be made to help each member, then the group must decide on what process they will use to come up with a solution that can be agreed upon.

There are three general processes to consider: 1) negotiation, 2) mediation, and 3) arbitration (Porter, 2003, pg. 5).

Negotiation involves two or more parties who each have something the other wants and attempt to reach an agreement through a process of bargaining when all parties have both shared and opposed interests (De Janasz, Dowd, Shneider, 2002). Another view of negotiating is that each party can block another party from attaining the goal of the negotiation. Negotiation theorists have pointed out several approaches to negotiation. not only distinguish between positional bargaining, which is competitive, and also make the distinction between soft, hard, and principled negotiation, the latter of which is based on cooperative principles, which look out for oneself as well as one's opponent (Fisher, Ury and Patton, 1991). James Poon (1998, p. 42) describes in a different manner that negotiation can be classified as distributive or integrative, in which distributive is defined as competitive win/lose bargaining, but the second type is a more productive type of negotiation.

In distributive bargaining strategy, it only focuses on achieving immediate goals with little regard for building future relationship, while in integrative bargaining strategy, the goal is to collaborate and generate one or more creative solutions so there's a chance for both parties to achieve the primary objectives (De Janasz, Dowd, Shneider, 2002).

In principled negotiation to get an agreement beneficial to both parties there are five principal fundamentals. (Fisher, Ury and Patton, 1991):

1) separate the people from the problem: The first principle is to separate the people from the issues. People tend to take positions on a matter and become personally involved in their positions. Thus, they tend to take responses to the issues as personal attacks. The three main reasons why people do that, according to Fisher and Ury, are emotions, communication (or lack thereof), and different perceptions of the problem. Separating people from the issues allows the parties involved to address the issues without damaging their relationship.

2) focus on interests, not positions: Rather than focusing on positions, a good agreement focuses on the parties' interests. When a problem is addressed by focusing on the underlying interests, it is more likely that a solution will be found that satisfies both parties. Determining what these interests are can be accomplished by asking questions such as, " Why is this an interest to them?" and/or " Why is this not of interest to them?" In other words, try to view things from the other person's perspective. Also important to a problem resolution is the realization that each side has multiple interests. Once the interests of both parties have been identified, they must discuss them together. If a party wants the other side to take their interests into account, the interest must be communicated clearly to the other party.

3) invent options for mutual gain: Inventing options for mutual gains is nothing more than brainstorming to find different options that can be selected as a solution to the problem that will benefit both parties mutually. The authors point out four major obstacles that inhibit inventing numerous options. The four obstacles are:

Parties may decide prematurely on an option and fail to consider or discuss alternatives.

Parties tend to narrow, rather than broaden, their options and search for a single answer.

Parties define the problem as win-lose, and an agreement comes at the expense of the other.

Parties are concerned with only their self-interests. " Solving their problem is their problem."

However, there are four techniques, according to Fisher and Ury (1991), to overcome these obstacles and generate creative options. First, there is brainstorming inventions. Separate the invention process from the selection process. After brainstorming inventions, start broadening the options through discussion with the other party. Both parties also need to search and engage in a mutual gain between both parties. This entails making sure that the agreement does not come as an expense to the other party. Finally, make their decision easy. Give them a decision that is painless and appeals to them and that they will have to think little about.

4) insist on objective criteria: Use objective criteria to resolve differences between two parties. This will also avoid destroying the relationship and will likely produce a wise agreement. Objective criteria can be derived from numerous sources, such as morals market value, scientific judgment, or costs, among others. (Fisher, Ury and Patton, 1991)

But before using objective criteria, first it must be developed. Criteria should be fair, legitimate, and practical and both parties must agree on which criteria is most suitable for the situation.

5) know oneself BATNA: When the Other Party Is More Powerful Negotiation is hard to accomplish when there are differences in power. To overcome this, Pruitt and Kim (2004) suggest ways for the weaker party to overcome these differences in power. They suggest not using bottom lines. The bottom line is what the party anticipates as the worst acceptable outcome, and most parties decide in advance to reject any proposal below that line. In the video, "Improving Your Negotiation Power" by R Fisher, also argue that having already committed to a bottom line inhibits inventiveness in generating options. The alternative to the bottom line is that the weaker party should know their best alternative to a negotiated agreement (BATNA). Knowing the BATNA will enable the weaker party to utilize all of their assets and understand their minimum acceptable requirements for an agreement. Instead of allowing the stronger party to reject anything less than their bottom line, the weaker party should reject any agreement that would leave them worse off than their BATNA. The authors state that the one with the better BATNA is actually the stronger party.

When a team decides to use the negotiation approach, no one else is involved in the process other than the team members themselves.

Negotiation consists of the team members each stating his or her side of the situation and what conclusion they would like to see happen. This process continues until the group has found a solution that each of the team members agrees.

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If the team cannot resolve the problem independently, mediation, using an impartial outside party to guide negotiations, may be an option, provided that everyone concerned agrees to participate, and to accept the final decision. The recommended steps for successful mediation are: The mediator explains the process, helping to create a supportive environment. Each member then relays relevant information without interruption. The mediator subsequently summarizes the position of each party, ensuring clear understanding. Then the mediator steers the team toward potential solutions, encouraging them to reach a mutually acceptable decision through negotiation.

Once the solution has been determined, the team discusses how best to implement it (Engleberg, Wynn & Schutter, 2003). In the event that the team is unable to resolve the problem, as evidenced by every method, including mediation, having failed to produce a solution, the team may pursue arbitration as a last resort. Arbitration, like mediation, uses an impartial, outside party who renders the final decision for the team after considering all the evidence provided by the participants. To use arbitration, each member must agree to abide by the determination of the arbitrator, regardless of his or her opinion about the decision (Engleberg, Wynn & Schutter, 2003).

Working within teams is not always an easy feat. There are times when team mates will disagree on certain subjects or situations, but there are always steps that teams can take to avoid larger problems and solve the conflicts at hand. Coming to an agreement and finding a resolution for conflicts within a group environment does not have to be as difficult as it seems.

The solution strategies mentioned in the above text serve as a great guideline for those situations that may occur. Everyone that works in a team environment should know how to utilize these strategies in order to come to a group based decision. All team members should know that their opinions do count in team matters, and they have a choice and a right to voice their opinions to the group. If team members that are involved in conflict follow these solution strategies they will succeed as an individual, and as a group.

Behavior is a key factor in the performance and effectiveness of any person, whether it be in the workplace, shopping or simply out with friends. Everyone negotiates his/her personal and professional lives and this is an important part of the competitive modern life today. Negotiations occur anywhere from dealing with people, business contracts, and services, buying products, official matters and relationships. James Poon (1998, p. 41) expressed that negotiation was a basic human activity. The world is like a giant negotiating table that people can negotiate many different things in different situations.

Conclusion

Some of the roles in the workforce deal with being a team. Learning to communicate effectively in the workforce relies on learning valuable techniques regarding behavior. Personalities and motivation to develop strategies are key elements reviewed to enhance productivity. Identifying methods to accomplish a common goal and working together as one within a team will promote the ability to acquire the end result. Assembling a team offers several benefits to a team leader and will build the connection between personality styles and communication to maximize productivity and promote a positive work environment. By utilizing different backgrounds,

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skills, and specific types of application, team leaders will create a focused and effective team and promote an overall positive environment to maximize productivity. Learning how to cultivate and develop strategies within a team will allow for maximum performance and productivity.

How conflict is resolved generally depends on the situation and the individuals. We rely on one of the five conflict management styles, accommodation, avoidance, competition, compromise, and collaboration to resolve conflict regularly, but we also can use the other four. Conflict resolution can be a subtle or conscious process, whichever of the five conflict management styles are used. We run into conflict every day, therefore the conflict will be resolved by a conflict management style.

Negotiating teams can create new opportunities for intellectual solutions. Researchers Leigh Thompson and Erika Peterson compared three types of negotiation situations: teams versus teams, teams versus solo negotiators, and solo negotiators versus solo negotiators. Assembled teams are known to bring added discussion and further information sharing than individuals do, particularly concerning conflicts, common interests, and designated priorities (Thompson & Peterson, 1997).

The presence of at least one team when negotiating results led to higher success. Teams stimulate more discussion and more information sharing than an individual does, particularly concerning interests, priorities, and conflict resolution. However, the wide range of personalities also creates conflict when creating a team. Team leaders look for dissimilar types of skilled individuals to balance and maintain their work relations. Pooling

different personalities to accomplish goals are beneficial to successful work relations.

Clearly, destructive conflict behavior does not benefit the team. Although it would be ideal if every member of every group consistently managed conflict constructively, the reality is quite different. People having varying backgrounds, values, standards, expectations, interests, beliefs, experiences and communication styles manage conflict in various ways, some constructive, and some not.

By fully understanding both the conflict and the available resolution strategies, team members are prepared to select the best approach for managing or resolving conflict, thereby diffusing the potential for it to derail the team's progress toward the achievement of its goals. Considering the inevitability of conflict and the consequences of allowing it to remain unresolved, these skills of recognizing and understanding the various types of conflict and conflict resolution strategies are valuable for the success of any team.