Resolving Team Conflicts

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Team Conflict

One of the major challenges in this day and age that occurs on a regular basis is the conflict found in the corporate office environment. Work-Team conflict is growing as quickly as is corporate America. The workplace and methods of communicating are changing dramatically. When properly structured and challenged, learning teams can be used effectively in the learning process and in developing new skills and sharpening existing ones. Learning teams can benefit from the research and experiences from self-directed work teams in the business world. Their critical elements and purposes are closely aligned.

In discussing Team Conflict, I will focus on a team’s conflict issues. I believe that work-teams and learning-teams can give people the things they need as human beings, while using technology, knowledge and experience to maximize their productivity. In this paper I will examine several issues that can potentially create conflicts on any team as well as some resources for avoiding these conflicts.

Teams

Although teams may have different labels and structures, a team is typically a group of individuals with shared commitments and goals in which managers share decision-making responsibilities with employees. A work team possesses characteristics in which team members are mutually accountable to one another, bound together and established as a group over time, and functioning in a social system context. Since the late 1980’s, businesses of all types have been implementing teams at a staggering rate. The number of workers participating in teams has seen dramatic increases since 1980, when only 5% of workers participated in teams. That number by 1990 had reached 20%, and today it is estimated that 50% of workers participate in team environments.

Businesses have discovered that when teams have purpose, tools for solving problems, and the empowerment to make changes, teams can be very effective. Teams are particularly good at combining team members’ talents and providing innovative solutions to unfamiliar problems. Work-team helps businesses organize and adapt to keep up
with changes in people’s attitudes and advances in technology; learning-team help team members effectively go through educational processes, and virtual team help businesses save time and resources in solving problems.

On the other hand, external demands such as competitiveness, globalization, and customer satisfaction have made it necessary to operate businesses in a group-based organizational structure. An example of this can be seen in the design of an aircraft, which involves many companies based in different geographical locations. They collaborate and work together to achieve one collective goal. An effective team process leads to a spirit of co-operation, co-ordination and commonly understood procedures.

Furthermore, teams can be seen as self-managing units or as being manager-led. Self-managed teams are the future of business because they are more flexible and cohesive than are manager led teams. The exchange of ideas within a self-managed team is more apparent in learning teams.

**The Myth of Self-Managing Teams**

Four steps should be taken to ensure that all team members understand the tasks and responsibilities of being a team member:

1. Give the team freedom to determine the reasons for acting.
2. Make the team aware of the possible consequences for not acting.
3. Allow all team members to be part of all decision-making.
4. Be careful when selecting members for a team. 

In forming teams, care must be taken to ensure that team members having various personalities can work together. The most powerful combinations are those that bring together virtual opposites, so that each individual brings something unique, emotionally and mentally, to the team. Yet working together can be a real challenge. An effective team process leads to a spirit of co-operation, co-ordination and commonly understood procedures in setting the team goals. This spirit of cooperation in turn provides a means of ownership to each team member. When each member has ownership, they will feel more accountable to the other team members.

Team goals should be specific. Goals should be measurable, achievable and realistic and have a specific time frame. A common cause or shared goal is the primary reasons a team comes together. A team can be anything from a family led by a mother or father with the children as team members to a department at work led by a department manager, or a sports team led by its coach. Teams are also formed at higher levels, such as the Homeland Security team or even that of the President of the United States and his cabinet. Teams exist in all shapes and forms. Within any team, a common purpose or goal must be established.

After setting the mission and vision for the company, evidence of leadership can be distilled to the following four actions:
Finding the right people; Providing them with the resources they need to do their jobs; Holding them accountable for meeting their own goals; Showing trust by getting out of the team’s way and allowing team members to do what they’ve committed to do. ¹

Trust and cohesiveness are critical to the success of a team. Team success is built on trust. “Trust is the cornerstone of the team and is by far one of the most difficult areas to promote. Without trust, people cannot communicate in an open way and relationships cannot be formed.” ¹ As Phelps points out, what’s wonderful about human nature is that trust begets trust. If you trust me, I’m more likely to trust you. The more we trust each other, the better we communicate. The better we communicate, the more productive we are together. It’s either an upward spiral, or a downward spiral, depending on the level of trust.” ¹

In an effective team environment, each member has the same goal. They each may have different roles and responsibilities, but the end result for each member should be the same. If one or more team members has his own agenda, this, too, can cause the team to fail. Team goals also create ambition, the term “Two heads are better than one” is very true.

Dealing with Conflict.

How people deal with conflict is a major obstacle that many people have to face. Conflict means perceived divergence of interest, or a belief that the parties’ current aspirations cannot be achieved simultaneously.

Why do conflicts arise in teamwork? Most common conflict arises from the unequal distribution of workload. Perhaps the most common cause is that each individual has a different understanding of the team and its purpose and goals. Within any team, a common purpose or goal must be established. While it is understandable that the team should have the same interests, goals and mission, nevertheless individual differences and personalities, perception and attribution, motivation, effective and ineffective teams roles and group decision-making techniques can create many kinds of conflicts.

Another cause of conflict that can arise, common to all teams but magnified by the way a team works, is the issue of trust among team members. Misunderstanding and miscommunication are two additional causes of potential conflict. Relationships can be affected by how team members use and manage their time while completing team objectives. Major conflict can occur when one or more team members becomes lazy or does not complete their work accurately. Teams are only productive when the work is spread around. Whatever the group members contribute to the team is what the team can expect to produce. No group can truly succeed without participation from all of the team members.

Perception discrepancy is a little more subtle than are other team conflicts, but possibly
it is more important. Simply put, teams see the same things in different ways. When teams have the same understanding of their respective roles, perceptions can be calibrated and conflict can be reduced. Therefore definitive roles should be clearly defined and agreed upon by all team members. It is crucial that these roles be determined as soon as the team is formed. Determination of roles helps establish a means of accountability. It is assumed that every team member will act accountably and be productive on a team, but this is not always the case because all circumstances may not be known by all team members.

Conflict may result if individuals overstep one another’s values, needs, expectations, and perceptions. Working as a team can cause a lot of aggravation if members feel that they are not getting the respect that they deserve. When team members try to contribute their fair share and are not being heard, tension may develop among a team. This can develop into resentment and cause additional conflicts. If a team reaches this point, it is very hard for team members to contribute and regain the trust needed among the members. In a virtual world, the way you come across in your first interactions will define future interactions—studies have shown that “virtual trust is either established or destroyed right up front.”

But on the other hand, conflict is inevitable in teamwork, just as it is in social relationships. Without conflict, growth is limited. Many people fear and avoid conflict because they don't know how to deal with it, yet conflict is good for many reasons. It exposes multiple points of view, allows team members to voice frustrations, promotes creative thinking, and it helps to maintain a balance of power within a team. In addition, allowing conflict permits members to be themselves.

Why the negative view of conflict?

With all the creative potential that team members have, why is conflict still viewed as something to be avoided or squelched? For two reasons: because conflict feels bad and because team members usually are not prepared to deal with it. Typically, they haven't been taught the difference between constructive conflict, which leads to innovation, and destructive conflict, which damages relationships. Without a knowledge of that framework, it's easy to believe that all conflict is bad. Unresolved conflict can be as toxic to the productivity of a team as poison is to a person.

Types of Conflict

There are two main types of conflict found within teams. First, A-type conflict, also known as emotional or affective conflict, is “personal, defensive, and resentful … rooted in anger, personal friction, personality clashes, ego, and tension,” basically lowering efficiency.\(^{10}\) Alternatively, cognitive conflict (C-type conflict) is “largely depersonalized”.\(^{11}\) C-type involves debate of “merits of ideas, plans, and projects,” which will require people to think about the views of others.\(^{12}\) According to Jehn (1997)\(^{13}\), based on existing work teams, research indicates groups that are ultimately effective accept C-type, not A-type conflict. A-type conflict leads to lower satisfaction and performance
rates by “significantly reduced decision quality, understanding, commitment, and acceptance,” while C-type is linked with “higher decision-making quality, greater understanding, higher commitment, and more acceptance.”

According to Capozzoli (1995) to engage in productive conflict, people have to learn and practice the skills of resolving conflict.

**Examples of the Team Conflict**

Our MBA learning team has been together for over two years and has been able to adapt each of its members' strengths to the completion of all learning team assignments. We started as a group of four people brought together in a classroom and ready to conquer the assignments at hand. We slowly became a team with a supportive social structure in which each individual adapted his/her behavior to optimize respective contributions. We needed to develop social relationships that would help the members gain trust among one another.

Since we have been together for some time, the roles and responsibilities have been informally assumed rather than formally assigned. For example, Mr. L and Mr. B have an outstanding working knowledge of PowerPoint, so our team has harnessed that strength to prepare all of our presentations. Even though Mr. L and Mr. B receive the input from each of the team members, they take it upon themselves to create the layout and insert each of our parts into the presentation. Mrs. M and Mr. D provide most of the team research for papers and presentations because of their aptitude with Internet and database searches. Mr. D provides the group with direction for most of the presentations because of his oral presentation skills. Our decision-making strategy varies depending on the task that needs to be accomplished.

Many managers have a fundamental belief that conflict is merely the result of poor communication and that deep down, we are all compatible and share the same interests. I call this “the myth of hidden harmony.” Because of that myth, many managers use conflict management as a way to improve people's communication skills. But by acting as if every conflict is a communication problem, they ignore very real disagreements. Better communication about true disagreements can actually increase the conflict around those disagreements. That's typically because the more we understand someone's position, the more we dislike that person.

In the beginning, working together on the team fantasy and trying to make decisions as a team was difficult at best. Initially I thought our problems were due to poor communication, but it was much more than that. Take for example our conflict situation, when Mr. D thought that only he could make final decisions and none of us were his equal in the teamwork. After discussing the situation, (and understanding each other’s needs), we still could not get arrive at a solution of our difficulties. After the discussion, Mr. D felt that the team members were lazy and making excuses, while the team members felt that Mr. D was wrong.
Not surprisingly, the situation got worse and became increasingly polarized. The original issue was all but forgotten as the parties developed an intense dislike of each other. Many times we have been in meetings in which our team member nodded politely at new ideas but went right back to doing things the same old way. Such behavior indicates the kind of culture in which any conflict or disagreement is considered taboo—the kind of culture that's ripe for destructive, covert conflict. But when people are willing to disagree publicly and challenge each other, you have the makings of constructive conflict. That's because when people are allowed to speak their minds, resentment doesn't have a chance to fester. Disagreements can lead to well-rounded decisions, because we should remember that there is no one best way to do anything.

In order to complete the final Learning Team project we have adopted the following schedule to ensure that all parts of the presentation are completed in a timely manner and with the utmost attention to detail. In addition to bringing each of our individual results, each team member brings their ideas for the PowerPoint and oral presentations, too. Time management is a difficult tool to master, but one that we have had great success in using appropriately to complete all assigned tasks. Since we have been together for so many classes, we have been able to identify our team’s peak-and-valley performance times. Through trial and error we have arrived at our team’s peak performance time. We tried meeting on different days and times throughout the week before finally agreeing on the time and day that is most conducive to producing our projects.

Wales (2002) defines assertiveness, as “the ability to understand and describe one’s needs, skillfully express one’s opinions and stand up for one’s beliefs.” However, some of our team members are not respectful of the others’ opinions and are not able to include everyone’s opinions for the betterment of the team assignment. So at the same time that we were doing our homework together, our relationship became worse every time. We did not treat each other like colleagues, did not give genuine feedback or push some team members to consider new possibilities. In my opinion it was because we created our team under the pressure from class advisors and didn’t have enough time to know our team members and to choose compatible team members.

We have only one female on our team, which leads to gender differences among team members. She is perceived as having a “female” management style. Women do have a different decision-making style. Men are more apt to direct, blame others, and use the vertical pronoun. Women collaborate, listen, and try to build teams, and assume the best in people. In our situation team conflict arose between team members when they tried to use different ways to manage the learning projects.

A recent personality-assessment survey concluded that women weigh two factors in making decisions: How it will affect the team and whether it will achieve short-term goals. Men focus on the competitive environment and long-term results. Why the difference? Most researchers see temperamental differences in the exercise of power. Men are apt to take a contractual approach.
In our team’s conflict situation one student, Mr. D, took the attitude that he had the power to make all decisions. Female student (Ms. M) wanted to work through people, even if she had that decision-making power. For example, each of our team members uses a variety of time management skills to complete individual and team assignments. Ms. M and Mr. L use a to-do list; Mr. B and Mr. D prioritize, and Ms. M uses an activity log to keep track of all that must be done because all of us must balance work, family and school. While we bring many types of time management skills to our team, we are not able to combine the best attributes of each to produce quality workmanship because of our team conflict situation. We all know that the more diverse the group is, the more potential there is for conflict for several reasons.

Two potentials for conflict are due to a language barrier and different culture belief systems. Also there might be difficulties due to a non-native American's interpretation of English or the native Americans' inabilities to understand a foreign accent. Due to cultural beliefs, a woman might not speak up or feel free to express her feelings because in her culture, doing so is not what women typically do.

In addition to reflective listening, problem solving is also a crucial element in a team, and it must be done effectively and wisely. Some of our team members feel as if they have not been heard, their concerns have not been addressed, and their ideas and input are not ranked among the proposed alternatives. In addition, they feel they have been verbally abused, offended, or mistreated. The conflict has escalated.

All our team members have set different ambitions and intentions for themselves. Trying to persuade people to change these ambitions may take some serious negotiating skills, patience, and compromise. Compromising and keeping an open mind can avoid most of these conflict situations. Unfortunately, we haven't used any of these powerful tools. In one instance, one of our team members stood up in front of his peers and proclaimed that our team relationships don’t help continue our learning process. The willingness of the student to speak against the grain ultimately turned into more of a conflict situation. When resolving conflicts through direct confrontation, it is important that the team have an effective leader who can control the team and who can also moderate the discussion and keep the team on track. It was our mistake at the beginning that our learning team did not choose a strong leader. Team members started competing with each other about power and the leadership position. Finally, one of our team members had to leave the team because he didn’t feel any support from the other team members in achieving the goal.

Competition begets competition, cooperation begets cooperation. A win-lose approach tends to escalate conflict and harden opposing positions, leading to destructive processes and outcomes and negative expectations for future interactions. A win-win approach fosters exploration of the root causes of the conflict and leads to constructive, sustainable solutions with positive expectations for future encounters.18

Methods of solving conflicts in Conflict Resolution
"... Conflict resolution means terminating conflict by methods that are analytical and get to the root of the problem. Conflict resolution, as opposed to mere management or settlement, points to an outcome that, in the view of the parties involved, is a permanent solution to the problem".  

Competition, collaboration, avoidance, accommodation, and compromising, are five approaches that may be taken to handle or resolve conflict. Competition occurs when one party seeks to achieve certain goals or to further personal interests, regardless of the impact on the parties to the conflict with whom he or she competes and dominates. Collaboration will produce a mutually satisfying outcome, as parties involved are willing to cooperate and focus on a full range of alternatives. Collaboration will permit each team member to comprehend the others’ positions. Collaboration is often thought of as the win-win approach.

Avoidance results in suppression or withdrawal. Avoiding overt actions can cause withdrawal or physical separation. Withholding differences for the benefit of the overall group characterizes suppression. The accommodation approach is when one party is willing to sacrifice his/her own interest and place the opposing parties’ interests over their own. Compromising is characterized by all members of the team participating in a give and take, giving in on one point to gain an advantage on another. In a compromise, there is no winner or loser. Negotiation, trade-offs, and a high level of flexibility are also involved in compromising.

It is important for any manager to know and understand the basic kinds of conflicts and their underlying sources. This is because he/she must have a clear picture of a conflict situation when he/she is faced with one. However, perception of conflict alone is not sufficient for making considered action decisions. The manager has to confirm and assess the existence of a genuine conflict in order to make a decision as to whether to avoid or to go ahead with conflicting managing activities.

Conflict isn't something that can be "solved" by teaching employees/students how to communicate more effectively or work together better in teams, important as these activities are. The best way to deal with conflict is to create the kind of culture in which conflict is acknowledged and supported as a natural part of the business process. So how can we, as management professionals, help create the kind of culture in which constructive conflict is encouraged? First, we should start by becoming comfortable with conflict.

**Six Steps in Managing Conflict**

There are six steps in managing conflict.

1. Explore the reasons for the disagreement.
2. Find alternate solutions for the disagreement.
3. Agree on the most appropriate solution.
4. Implement the solution.
5. Evaluate the solution.
6. Practice the resolution skills.

In order for any team to be successful, it’s essential that members know the basics of conflict resolution, delegation, and consensus building. Each member must also rely on whatever they have learned on their own to move the team through these struggles. Our team conflict had arisen from differences among team members in terms of power, values and attitudes. We could have reduced conflict by resolving the problems that were causing it.

First of all, we should define the conflicting interests between ourselves and the others as a mutual problem to be solved cooperatively. We should respect ourselves and our own interests and respect the others and their interests.

Second, we could bring the class advisor in or choose a mediator to help solve the problem. In any case, it is important that team members deal with disputes quickly and openly and try to convene group-focused forums for open and honest discussion of team conflict.

Another factor to consider in resolving conflicts may be the maturity levels of a team’s members. Depending upon team members’ maturity levels, a negotiation or mediation method may be adopted.

a. Negotiation

Mutual negotiation among team members is another very effective conflict resolution technique. Negotiation is the process in which two or more entities come together to discuss common and conflicting interests in order to reach an agreement of mutual benefit. Negotiation involves two or more parties having common interests and conflicting interests who enter a process of interaction with the goal of reaching an agreement.

Negotiation goes hand in hand with the direct approach as mentioned above. Mutual negotiation can be a very effective method of resolving conflicts if the roles of team members are clearly defined and there is mutual respect among team members for the respective roles they play. In essence, it is important to reach a good negotiation as long as the manager/facilitator employs the following reminders:

1. Do not approach negotiations as if they are a game.
2. Follow the planned strategy.
3. Do not personalize issues.
4. Do not be afraid to fail.
5. Remember that negotiation is not always feasible.
6. Be open to coming into an agreement.
7. Be flexible to the other party’s needs.
It is important to involve the entire team together in stating the issues so that all the members involved have a clear understanding of the conflict. It is important that each member is able to express his or her feelings or opinions without interruption. Give each team member time to vent. All members should listen carefully and be willing to tolerate and respect each other's views. Team members should avoid using the word "you," and thus avoid blaming others. The language used in working through the conflict should be appropriate and respectful. Team members should maintain eye contact and nod his or her head to assure others of their understanding. To assure understanding, repeat the issue back to each team member. Do not judge what is being saying. Asking open-ended questions will assist in the understanding of one another and alleviate a defensive response. However, all members should be free to ask questions about each other's views so that all the issues or feelings can be clarified to avoid further misunderstanding. If a conflict cannot be resolved, consider arranging for a third party to mediate the discussion.

b. Mediation

Mediation is an effective and humane way of solving problems, especially in a team conflict situation. Mediation is the most effective method for discovering the parties' interests. Mediation is a step used when collaboration is ineffective. The mediator should be a neutral person qualified to handle such issues and one who understands the principles of the rights of conduct. The mediator helps the parties reach an outcome that satisfies them rather than one aimed at proving right and wrong. Through mediation, parties are able to work together to reach a solution. Mediation may not be effective if one of the parties is unwilling to cooperate or compromise.

As happened in our team, everybody thought that we could handle this conflict ourselves and that we didn’t need outside help, but finally we had to dismiss one of our team members. Mediation also may not be effective if one of the parties has a significant advantage in power over some other team member. A mediator can help each side understand the other side, to see if each party is truly appreciating the other side’s interests, needs, and proposals.

Mediation is also important because it makes for clearer lines of communication. As mentioned before, mediation must be voluntary and there must be openness to give and take, as opposed to relying on the court system that is a give-give or take-take situation. In order to use mediation, the two parties must be on good enough terms to communicate with one another because communication is an important key to the process of mediation.

When one of the team members left the team, that occurrence did not bring about a perfect resolution to the team’s problems, but it helped the remaining team members to finish the learning project. Yet it left us with the open question: How should we have managed the conflict in this situation? Using alternative dispute resolution (ADR) or perhaps the better term--appropriate dispute resolution, we could have solved our conflict in a more effective way. Involving a third party or a mediator would have been
an effective method of achieving conflict resolution.

The same situation could have been handled in an entirely different manner as follows: We could have asked for a mediator from outside the team. Sometimes, mediation requires compromise on both sides, and maybe both the parties in conflict will be dissatisfied with the final decision. The litmus test under such a situation is to see how the mediation’s outcome affects the team goal. A last resort for conflict resolution in extreme situations can be to enforce team rules to dispel a conflict. However, it is important to understand that when these kinds of conflict resolution strategies are used, it is time to re-evaluate the roles of group members, redefine the working rules of the team or in rare cases, even reconstitute the team.

Though conflict is a necessary “poison”, avoiding personal conflict can improve team productivity as well as foster team relationships. Even though one of the members leaves the team, the outcome could be very emotional and risky. You never know how people are going to react to being displaced. This can lead to many conflicts due to differing perceptions. Again, our Learning Team has done an incredible job in controlling and managing these sensitive issues. The bottom line is that team members must do what ever it takes to finish the program.

A Basic Premise: Keep the End Goal in Focus

One of the basic rules for working in a team is always to keep the end goal in focus. Every individual member on a team must ask the questions of himself or herself, “How does this relate to our task?” “How can we work together in the future?” and remember that “Mediation focuses on the future. Mediation asks what can we do now to make this work and to solve this problem?”

Conclusion

I chose this topic because as a team member, I am constantly faced with conflict within the learning group. However, I was raised without much conflict, so as a result I have a tendency to avoid it. My goal in doing this research was to learn and to equip myself with some knowledge to be effective at conflict management.

In my team, I see the three main causes of conflict to be misunderstanding among team members, discrepancy among team members’ perceptions, and blockage of access to scarce resources such as power. The conflict management strategies that I think could help avoid misunderstanding in this conflict are the establishment of ground rules and a conflict resolution process. Also, it is most beneficial to view conflict as a process rather than as an act of the parties involved in the conflict.

In self-directed teams, everyone shares equally in the responsibilities (Blanchard, 1995). Managing conflict often helps individuals to become better at learning how to deal with other individual perspectives. Addressing conflicts allow group members to vent their emotions, release stress, and reduce tensions. By facing conflict together,
group members have the potential to become closer to other group members, an outcome which can have a positive overall effect.

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. I'm not sure that our situation was preventable, but I think there are some ways to manage it. My opinion is that an independent mediator could help to solve our conflict.

Within any team, there can be positive (functional) or negative (dysfunctional) conflict, depending on the type of conflict present. Cognitive conflict can increase group effectiveness through focusing the group’s attention on activities and issues. On the other hand, affective conflict can undermine the usefulness of groups by reducing the creativity and quality of the team’s work. Overall, it is clear 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.

Too much conflict within any group can ultimately take up valuable time and destroy productivity, thus leaving students emotional and less apt to produce superior work results. This is what happened to our team. However, we have learned a lot through this conflict situation. The student who is independent does not need to worry as much about conflict that will sever a learning relationship, but sometimes the independent student will miss out on conflict that inspires high-quality output as a good Learning-Team.

Another great benefit of any conflict in teams is the “meeting of the minds.” Conflict and the subsequent compromise born in this type of environment encourages “Thinking Out of the Box,” which can lead a company or learning group to new focuses and ideas never found in a traditional independent working approach. There may be less conflict in a setting with independent workers, but they will lack the ingenuity created from conflicts in teams.

Friction between individuals and groups is typically thought of as something harmful, and it usually is. It generates heat and discomfort, disrupts interactions, and can destroy relationships. Between a couple, it can lead to divorce. Between countries, it can lead to war. Within corporations, it can distort and disrupt communication and ruin cohesiveness. Businesses of all types spend considerable time and money trying to reduce or eliminate conflict. But in human terms, conflict is surely one of the most plentiful and volatile sources of energy on the planet.

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