

1.5.12: Conflict Resolution

Learning Objectives

- Describe various ways of interpreting and responding to conflict in interpersonal communication

Interpersonal conflict occurs in the workplace between individuals. Conflict can also occur within working groups and is sometimes magnified in that setting. When we hear the word “conflict,” we typically think about all the negatives associated with the word. Most of us would like to avoid conflict entirely; however, conflict can also be productive.

Positive conflict comes from recognizing disagreement as part of a healthy process. It is an exchange of passionate ideas. This exchange helps us find creative solutions as well as testing weaknesses of current solutions. The difficulty in keeping conflict positive is in having norms regarding how ideas are expressed and discussed.

A tolerable amount of conflict is vital to group success in order to avoid groupthink and to generate more innovative ideas among members of the group, who may have diverse opinions and points of view. In addition, positive conflict generates buy-in and offers elements of ownership and a sense of cooperation and enhanced membership to all of the group members. When members of a group feel safe expressing conflicting beliefs and opinions, groups are more productive and less prone to conformity.

Conflict is necessary for good results. Learning to understand and manage conflict is critical when working in organizations. Let’s explore conflict more deeply in order to understand its broad impact and its direct impact on workplace communication.

Sources of Team Conflict

Let’s take a look at a few examples of conflict within teams.

Fund Allocation

A new product team may find itself split between allocating funds for the second release of the device or bringing a new product to market. The team may find about half of its members preferring one path and the other half advocating for the other.

In this case, the team may split into two factions—or more if there is additional disagreement within each group. Even if business considerations support one group’s position more strongly, powerful personalities, interpersonal complexity, and group history can come into play to overwhelm those practical factors.

Differences with Management

Employees may think, “Why doesn’t the boss just ask us? We do it every day and that will never work.” The boss may think, “Those employees don’t realize what that will cost. It will blow the entire department budget in half the time.”

Gaps in communication between leaders and the teams they lead can cause particularly thorny conflicts. There may be conflict with management because management has not given clear goals to the team or may not be supporting the team. The organization could have a culture that does not allow teams to work effectively. In extreme situations, this can lead to the team’s refusal to follow the directions of its leader.

Sales Versus Service

A company organizationally separates its sales employees from its service (installation and maintenance) employees. On more than one occasion, Sales asked, “What are those service people thinking? We can’t charge the customer for every little thing.” Equally frequently, service is asking, “What are those sales people thinking? Are they giving the company away? We can’t install it for that little.”

When different teams don’t take the time to understand the roles and tasks of individuals on different teams, conflict can arise between different functional groups within the organization.

Unproductive negative conflict should be avoided and must be swiftly addressed and resolved when it does present itself. Because of the dangerous nature of negative conflict and the toll it takes on productivity and moral, it may potentially lead to Human Resource Management issues or even a lawsuit.

What are the Symptoms of Team Conflict?

Symptoms of conflict are seen in the communications of the members. They illustrate themselves in a variety of ways. Once we recognize the symptom, we can find a solution.

Almost everyone has endured the experience of being part of a team that was plagued with conflict. Whether in a large group that erupts in anger and can't finish a meeting, or a small group of two or three individuals that resort to backbiting and gossiping to vent frustration over a conflict, everyone has been a part of a team where conflict has gotten out of control. With this in mind, there are several symptoms of conflict that can be identified in groups that can help them to recognize and manage conflict before it tears them apart. By identifying the following symptoms related to communication, trust, and opposing agendas, the team leader can identify conflict before it erupts. As you read through these symptoms, think of the teams that you are a part of and look for symptoms that exist in your team.

One common symptom of conflict is a lack of communication or a lack of respectful communication. This is most often seen when teams fail to have meaningful meetings. Most often, non-communicating meetings are characterized by team members sitting and listening to what the boss has to say. Often chatter or silence prevails among such teams. A lack of communication can also be noted when team members don't get along and so refuse to talk to each other. These feuds create barriers within teams and prevent communication. A lack of communication or disrespectful communication leads to a lack of trust, which is another symptom of team conflict. Teams that fail to produce desired results often lack the trust in one another as team members that is necessary to succeed. Without trust in a team, verbal or non-verbal conflict becomes the norm of the team. Team members spend more energy protecting their own positions and jobs than they do producing what is required for the team's success. When trust erodes in a team, the habit of blaming others becomes the norm as individuals try to protect themselves. Team members become enemies that compete against each other rather than allies that build and help one another to achieve a common goal. Teams that lack trust often gossip about other members or have frequent side conversations after meetings to discuss opposing opinions. Such activity sucks strength out of the team and its purpose.

Another symptom of team conflict can be seen when team members have opposing agendas. This is not to be confused with members who have different opinions. Having different opinions in a group can be very healthy if managed correctly because it can create better ideas and ways of getting the job done. However, when team members have opposing agendas, more is at stake than differing opinions; two individuals are fiercely committed to the exact opposite approach. Opposing agendas can create confusion in team members and can cause them to lose sight of their role in the team and of the team's final goal. Teams must work toward a common goal in order to be successful. Extreme effort must be made to reconcile differences, or such a team can look forward to failure.

Avoiding Destructive Conflict

In most instances of team conflict, avoidance is a worse solution than engagement with the conflicting situation. Moreover, avoided conflict will lead to less optimal solutions and may even prevent the team from finishing a project. Thus, from a manager's perspective, it is a simple equation of a cost/benefits analysis in that the cost to the organization is greater when teams avoid conflict than when they engage in it.

Fostering support, trust, and open communication is also essential if relationship conflicts are to be reduced and quickly resolved. Open communication can be established by the following:

- **Establish ground rules.** Some rules might include the following: Take turns when talking and do not interrupt. Ensure that each team member has equal time when stating their perspective. Listen for something new and bring something new to the discussion. Avoid restating the facts and "talking in circles." Avoid power plays, and eliminate status or titles from the discussion.
- **Listen actively and compassionately.** Avoid thinking of a counterargument while the other person is speaking. Listen to the other person's perspective rather than listening to your own thoughts. Don't make an effort to remember points just so you can refute them one by one.
- **Point out the advantages of resolving the conflict.** "I know you feel that is too much for us to spend right now, but we should figure out how to solve this problem. Then, we can figure out when to spend that money."
- **Maintain a neutral vantage point and be willing to be persuaded.** "Can you help me understand why...."
- **Avoid all-or-none statements such as "always" and "never," and point out exceptions when these statements are used.** Rather than say, "we have never done it that way," try "we had good reason for not doing that in the past, but let's talk this through to see if conditions have changed."

- **Create a goal of discovery rather than of winning or persuading.** “Let’s set aside our final decision until our next meeting. This meeting, let’s brainstorm solutions and try to put a cost to each.”
- **Be alert to common goals and where goals overlap as each party is communicating their perspective.** “I’m not sure I reach the same conclusion as you, but a 5% decrease is something we do all appreciate.”
- **Use clarifying statements to ensure the other party feels understood and listened to.** “What I heard you say is that you feel unappreciated and that you lack vital feedback to help you perform, is this correct?”
- **Help team members to separate the problem from the person.** “I know your job is to remind us of the rules, but could we try to approach this a different way?”
- **Use techniques such as role-playing, putting oneself in the competitor’s shoes, or conducting war games. Such techniques create fresh perspectives and engage team members.** “Let me try to be the devil’s advocate. You tell me your solution, and I’ll be the technician trying to poke holes in the idea.”
- **Team members should recognize each other for having expressed their view and feelings.** “I’m glad to hear your side all the way through. Thank you.”
- **Help each team member to understand all the other perspectives, and help them to re-frame the situation.** “So, if I heard you correctly, you are concerned about x. Is it possible that we could address this by trying y?”

Solutions to Conflict

Conflict is a natural and necessary element of a healthy team experience. It will occur even in the best teams. It can be constructive.

A team that never experiences conflict is likely to be less productive than a team that does experience conflict. This is especially true if the task that a team is attempting to complete is complex in nature or highly detailed. Without having members question specific actions, specific decisions, or the specifics of the proposed solution, it may appear to the team that there is only one way to solve the problem or complete the task.

When choosing team members, consider making choices that will promote healthy conflict. You will want to avoid fostering groupthink while avoiding people who already clash with one another. People who want peace at any price and scramble to quash even productive, positive conflict are also not especially useful. While you may choose individuals for their personality traits, commitment is equally important. If team members are individually or collectively indifferent toward the overall goal, they probably will not perform well. A lack of commitment can also lead to a lack of conflict. If the team is committed to the overall goal and members are well chosen, there can be a healthy dose of conflict in the process to complete the task.

When conflict does occur, it is important to address it immediately. Although developing a solution to the conflict may take time, acknowledging it will help to ensure that it can become productive to the team. “Whatever the problem, effective teams identify, raise, and resolve it. If it’s keeping them from reaching their goal, effective teams try to do something about it. They don’t ignore it and hope it goes away.”^[1] By not addressing conflict, the leader risks sending the message that conflict is unmanageable, which can cause vested members to become complacent or feel their input is not valued. In the worst-case scenario, a conflict that is not resolved could go from being task oriented to personal.

How Do Teams Prevent Damaging Conflict?

In order to prevent damaging conflict, the team leader must lay a conflict-friendly foundation for the team. The following approach will help the team leader to set the stage for conflict that is creative and productive:

1. Set a clear goal for the team.
2. Make expectations for team members explicit.
3. Assemble a heterogeneous team, including diverse ages, genders, functional backgrounds, and industry experience.
4. Meet together as a team regularly and often. Team members who don’t know one another well don’t know each other’s positions on the issues, impairing their ability to argue effectively. Frequent interaction builds the mutual confidence and familiarity team members require to express dissent.
5. Assign roles such as devil’s advocate and sky-gazing visionary and change these roles up from meeting to meeting. This is important to ensure all sides of an issue have been considered.
6. Use techniques such as role-playing, putting oneself in the competitor’s shoes, or conducting war games. Such techniques create fresh perspectives and engage team members.
7. Actively manage conflict. Don’t let the team acquiesce too soon or too easily. Identify and treat apathy early, and don’t confuse a lack of conflict with agreement.

Resolving Conflict

Interpersonal conflict should be managed and resolved before it degenerates into verbal assault and irreparable damage to a team. Dealing with interpersonal conflict can be a difficult and uncomfortable process. Usually, as team members, we use carefully worded statements to avoid friction when confronting conflict.

The first step to resolving interpersonal conflict lies in acknowledging the existence of the interpersonal conflict. Recognizing the conflict allows team members to build common ground by putting the conflict within the context of the larger goal of the team and the organization. Moreover, the larger goal can help by giving team members a motive for resolving the conflict.

As team members, we all understand the inevitability of interpersonal conflicts. Open and supportive communication is vital to a high performing team. One way to achieve this is by separating the problem from the person. Problems can be debated without damaging working relationships. When interpersonal conflict occurs, all sides of the issue should be recognized without finger-pointing or blaming. Above all, when a team member gets yelled at or blamed for something, it has the effect of silencing the whole team. It gives the signal to everyone that dissent is not allowed, and, as we know, dissent is one of the most fertile resources for new ideas.

When faced with conflict, it is natural for team members to become defensive. However defensiveness usually makes it more difficult to resolve a conflict. A conflict-friendly team environment must encourage effective listening. Effective listening includes listening to one another attentively, without interruption (this includes not having side conversations, doodling, or vacant stares). The fundamentals to resolving team conflict include the following elements:

1. Prior to stating one's view, a speaker should seek to understand what others have said. This can be done in a few clarifying sentences.
2. Seek to make explicit what the opposing sides have in common. This helps to reinforce what is shared between the disputants.
3. Whether or not an agreement is reached, team members should thank each other for having expressed their views and feelings. Thanking the other recognizes the personal risk the individual took in breaking from groupthink and should be viewed as an expression of trust and commitment toward the team.

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1. LaFasto, Frank M. J., and Carl E. Larson. *When Teams Work Best: 6,000 Team Members and Leaders Tell What It Takes to Excel*. Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage Publications, 2002, p. 81.

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