

1.4: Conflict Within Teams


Learning Objectives

- Describe common types and causes of conflict that arise within teams.
- Describe common causes of conflict that arise within teams.
- Explain how conflict can be beneficial to teamwork.
- Describe common approaches to conflict resolution.

Common Types of Team Conflict

Conflict is a common occurrence on teams. Conflict itself can be defined as antagonistic interactions in which one party tries to block the actions or decisions of another party. Bringing conflicts out into the open where they can be resolved is an important part of the team leader's or manager's job.

There are two basic types of team conflict: substantive (sometimes called task) and emotional (or relationship).

-  **Substantive conflicts** arise over things such as goals, tasks, and the allocation of resources. When deciding how to track a project, for example, a software engineer may want to use a certain software program for its user interface and customization capabilities. The project manager may want to use a different program because it produces more detailed reports. Conflict will arise if neither party is willing to give way or compromise on his position.
- **Emotional conflicts** arise from things such as jealousy, insecurity, annoyance, envy, or personality conflicts. It is emotional conflict when two people always seem to find themselves holding opposing viewpoints and have a hard time hiding their personal animosity. Different working styles are also a common cause of emotional conflicts. Julia needs peace and quiet to concentrate, but her office mate swears that playing music stimulates his creativity. Both end up being frustrated if they can't reach a workable resolution.

Practice Question

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Conflict Can Be Beneficial

Not all conflict is negative. Just as some forms of stress can be beneficial, so can some types of conflict. **Eustress** is a positive reaction to stress that generates a desire to achieve and overcome challenges. For instance, some people find that they produce their best work when a deadline is looming and the pressure to produce gets the adrenaline flowing. Team conflicts can also produce positive results when the conflict centers on substantive issues. Conflict can spark new ideas and generate creativity.

On the other hand, when people feel they cannot disagree or offer different opinions, new ideas cannot emerge. **Groupthink** is the mindset that develops when people put too much value on team consensus and harmony. It is common when individuals are afraid to go against what most group members—especially dominant members—think. Some degree of conflict helps teams avoid groupthink and forces the group to make choices based on rational decision making.

If there is too much cooperation, the best ideas may never get shared and team effectiveness is sacrificed for the sake of efficiency. For the same reasons that diversity bestows benefits on a workforce, a mix of ideas and opinions improves team performance and decision making. If there is too much conflict, however, then nothing can get done. Employees on the team become less satisfied and motivated and may turn to social loafing or may even work against other members out of sheer frustration.

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Common Causes of Conflict

Some common causes of negative conflict in teams are identified as follows:

- Conflict often arises when team members focus on **personal (emotional) issues** rather than work (substantive) issues. Enrico is attending night school to get his degree, but he comes to work late and spends time doing research instead of focusing on the job. The other team members have to pick up his slack. They can confront Enrico and demand his full participation, they can ignore him while tensions continue to grow, or they can complain to the manager. All the options will lower team performance.
- **Competition over resources**, such as information, money, supplies or access to technology, can also cause conflict. Maria is supposed to have use of the laboratory in the afternoons, but Jason regularly overstays his allotted time, and Maria's work suffers. Maria might try to "get even" by denying Jason something he needs, such as information, or by complaining to other team members.
- **Communication breakdowns** cause conflict—and misunderstandings are exacerbated in virtual teams and teams with cross-cultural members. The project manager should be precise in his expectations from all team members and be easily accessible. When members work independently, it is critical that they understand how their contributions affect the big picture in order to stay motivated. Carl couldn't understand why Latisha was angry with him when he was late with his reports—he didn't report to her. He didn't realize that she needed his data to complete her assignments. She eventually quit, and the team lost a good worker.
- Team morale can be low because of **external work conditions** such as rumors of downsizing or fears that the competition is beating them to market. A manager needs to understand what external conditions are influencing team performance.

Common Approaches to Conflict Resolution

There are five common approaches, or styles, to handling negative conflict. Each of the approaches combines some degree of cooperation and assertiveness. Each of them is more likely to be effective in certain cases and not in others. A manager has the responsibility to make sure that the conflict resolution process—whichever approach is followed—is executed impartially and with respect for all the parties involved. Finally, experts agree that it is better to address conflict sooner rather than later to prevent escalation that would affect team performance. The five approaches are described in the following text. An easy way to remember these approaches are as "no way, my way, halfway, your way, and our way."

Avoiding (no way)

Rarely, but occasionally, the best approach to conflict is to ignore it. When the reason for the conflict is trivial (as when someone was inadvertently left off an e-mail) or when waiting for more information would help resolve the conflict, the avoidance approach is appropriate. The manager may also want to avoid the conflict if she wants team members to handle it informally, on their own—and if the conflict does not significantly interfere with team performance. A manager may also decide to avoid an issue if there could be no possible resolution to addressing the conflict (a "lose-lose" situation). Consider the case of a well-liked foreman in the inventory department of a major retailing firm with fewer than three months until his retirement. He had been leaving early and generally not meeting his responsibilities. His direct reports made excuses and covered for him. The manager felt conflicted because the foreman was setting a bad example, but she decided that team morale would suffer if the foreman were disciplined. It was a "no-win" scenario.

Dominating (my way)

The dominating style ("my way or the highway") may actually be an appropriate response in emergency situations or when quick, decisive action is needed. It may also be the only effective approach for unpopular decisions or when individual team members are personally affected. Again, imagine that a popular and senior team member has been making disparaging and offensive remarks about another individual on the team. The target is not the type to complain, but you have heard that he is unhappy and thinking about leaving the team. You may be tempted to get them together to hash out the problems, but a better approach might be to tell the senior team member that his behavior is affecting team performance, that you are relying on him to behave more professionally, and that you will be monitoring the situation.

Compromising (halfway)

Compromising can be an effective approach

- when the arguments on both sides are equally rationale.
- when the participants are fairly equal in status.

- when both sides are willing to give something up.
- when time or expediency is a factor.

The example at the beginning of this section referred to a software engineer who favored a certain software program to track a project for its user interface and customization capabilities. The project manager wanted to use a different program because it produced more detailed reports. As a compromise, the software engineer agreed to customize the software to produce two key reports, and the project manager agreed to support the engineer's choice of program.

Accommodating (your way)

Accommodating a team member may be an effective strategy for resolving conflict when you agree that the team member is, in fact, right. It can also be a good approach if you don't feel strongly about the result, if you want to gain goodwill from the team member, or if it is more important at that particular time to keep the whole team functioning and cooperating.

Collaborating (our way)

The collaborative approach is also known as the win-win approach. It is mostly used in high-stakes conflicts when getting a resolution is too important for the issues not to be carefully examined. It requires a great deal of skill to use the collaborative approach successfully. Negotiation and mediation are types of collaboration, usually in formal situations such as labor negotiations or creating employment contracts for senior level management. Negotiation and mediation are most effective when both parties have something to gain and something to lose, and when there is great amount of interdependence.

Compromise vs Collaboration

Since this is a common point of confusion, let's clarify the difference between compromise and collaboration. Although both modes result in the parties getting their needs met, the process and result are distinctly different. As mediation consultant Dr. Ralph Kilmann explains "The key distinction concerns whose needs get met, and to what extent, as a result of using a particular conflict mode. Compromising means that each person gets partially satisfied but not completely satisfied." For example, compromise might be a 50/50 split or a 75/25 split or some other combination. The key point is that both people get less than 100% of their needs met. The totals add up to 100, but it's a zero sum game, where one person's gain is the other person's loss.

However, based on the [Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Model](#) Instrument (TKI Conflict Model), collaboration can result in both parties getting 100% of their needs met. Briefly, collaboration involves making conflict more complex specifically to expand the size of (rather than simply divvy up) the pie. Kilmann notes that to be effective, collaboration requires trust, empathy, effective listening skills, and synergy. Success in using this mode can result in development of "a creative solution that uniquely satisfies everyone's needs—a 100/100 resolution instead of a 50/50 split."

? ? Practice Question

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