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Effectively Managing Team Conflict

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Dealing with Conflict

Successful managers can effectively manage conflict. This ability is considered a core competency and is required of managers who want to grow and advance. Unfortunately, it is also one of the most difficult skills a manager can develop.

The objective of this white paper is to illustrate team conflict symptoms and causes; to determine how to address team conflict using specific tools, skills, and processes; and to improve the ability of managers to build teams that can deal effectively with both healthy and unhealthy conflict.

This paper is written from the point of view of a manager, supervisor, or team leader. Although written from this perspective, team members or individual contributors can certainly benefit from reading this paper as well.

When dealing with conflict, there are four major questions that should be asked:
1. What are the symptoms of team conflict?
2. What causes team conflict?
3. How do I address team conflict?
4. What tools and aids can I use to help my team deal with conflict quickly and effectively?

1. What Are the Symptoms of Team Conflict?

Conflict can be defined as a serious disagreement over needs or goals. For the purpose of this paper, team conflict is defined as serious disagreements over needs or goals *among team members*. Conflict behaviors, or symptoms of conflict, include:

- Not completing work on-time or to quality goals
- Not returning phone calls or e-mails
- Not responding to requests for information
- Hoarding information that should be shared
- Finger pointing
- Not attending required meetings
- Absenteeism
- Gossip
- Passive/aggressive behavior
- Hostility
- Complaining
- Verbal abuse
- Filing grievances or lawsuits
- Physical violence

The last two items, filing grievances or lawsuits and physical violence, require specialized and/or legal help beyond the scope of this paper.

Each behavior, by itself, does not necessarily indicate conflict. People don't always complete work on time or answer all phone calls. Sometime they miss meetings. These individual behaviors might be acceptable—unless a behavior is taken to an extreme and causes severe or irreparable damage. An extreme example might be

poor performance, including not meeting work goals over a period of time that has an impact on team performance. Another example is missed deadlines caused by prolonged absenteeism or just not getting work done. Either example can become severe or cause irreparable damage if not corrected. Either of these behaviors requires intervention, or at least an investigation. Let's look at two scenarios.

In **Scenario A**, Fred is the lead hardware engineer in charge of the architecture for a new computer system. In the past, Fred's work was good to excellent, with the latter being the norm for the past few years. Fred is someone we could count on and delegate to, a responsible and responsive team member. Now Fred misses work, some of his deliverables are late, and his work is not up to the quality of previous assignments. In meetings, he becomes hostile and argumentative. When a junior member of the team asks Fred for help he accuses the junior member of being lazy and not able to do his job. The junior member tells Fred that the whole team knows that Fred is coasting on past achievements and should be fired!

In **Scenario B**, a project team is focused on a new application that has to be rolled out within the next three months. Some team members have been late with deliverables and team meetings are negative and sometimes degrade to shouting matches among members. Project features and functions that should have been included have been omitted or missed. In addition, team members do not always attend meetings or report on status, and it is very clear that cliques have formed with agendas that are not in the best interests of the team.

Although we do not have a lot of information, we can already determine that we need to find out what's going on with Fred and his team. If we do not deal with the situation it can become severe. In the second scenario, we can see that project team members are not working well together, power struggles are occurring, milestones and deliverables are not being met, and productivity is declining. We can see multiple symptoms of team conflict in each case, with more advanced symptoms in the second scenario. Neither situation will resolve itself and so requires intervention before serious damage occurs to the teams and projects.

To summarize, the best way to identify the symptoms of team conflict is to be aware of the kinds of behaviors that lead to conflict. The list above is a good list to use. When we identify extreme behaviors or multiple symptoms, we know we need to investigate. We also know we do not have a high-performance team.

What is a high-performance team? It's a group of people who have complementary skills, who understand roles and goals, and who are committed to achieving those goals together. An effective team works together toward mutual goals, using their individual skills and supporting each other. They communicate and share information. They understand they have a "group identity" and are committed to each other, reveling in praise and recognition and sharing the hard times. They respect each other. They have a leader who can direct, support, be hands-on or off as needed, and establishes and models how the team will work together. Because of these characteristics and their leader, they will be able to differ at times, have conflict and get beyond it, and maybe even use conflict to expand perspectives and find better solutions than they would have otherwise.

A high-performance team:
- Works together to achieve mutual goals
- Recognizes that each member is accountable, a team player, and committed to achieving team goals
- Communicates effectively with each other
- Has a balance of team members with the skills and abilities to meet mutual goals
- Shares the joy of achievement and the pain of not meeting goals
- Shares information, helps each other, and recognizes that the success of the group is dependent upon each individual

- Is able to deal with conflict
- Understands roles and responsibilities and respects each other
- Marches to the same tune or is aligned with goals and commitments

By definition then, a non-productive team, or a team in conflict, does not have these traits. When conflict is not handled, it becomes poisonous. It reduces productivity, causes missed deadlines and poor quality, can impact the health of team members, and causes turnover. However, when team conflict is resolved, team members grow individually and as a team. They are better able to deal with conflict.

2. What Causes Team Conflict?

Conflict is a serious disagreement over needs or goals. Said another way, conflict occurs because of an inability to address needs or goals, or because goals are unclear, unacceptable, unrealistic, or are in opposition to the parties involved.

Together, we could create a long list of things that cause team conflict. Here's a good start.
- Poor or no communication
- Lack of problem solving skills or getting to "root cause"
- Lack of clarity in purpose, goals, objectives, team and individual roles
- Uncertainty about or lack of resources and sources for help and support
- Poor time management
- Lack of leadership and management
- Team members bored, not challenged, not really interested
- Lack of skills and abilities in team members
- Personality conflicts
- Personal problems
- Turnover

Some of these can be seen as both cause and result of conflict. How do these things happen? We can see that some of these causes of conflict can be dealt with directly through management and leadership. Others challenge us in different ways.

Being able to resolve conflict effectively is a critical team skill. The manager, as leader, holds the key to helping team members resolve conflict and develop trust in each other. Without trust team members will not bond. If they do not trust each other they will not be able to deal with conflict. Conflict resolution is one of the key factors associated with committed and productive teams. So what causes it in the first place?

3. How Do I Address Team Conflict?

As a manager, what do I do to address team conflict? We've listed causes; now let's generate a plan to deal with the causes. Here are the steps we'll use:
  A. Define the problem
  B. Gather data
  C. Analyze the data
  D. Choose the best solution
  E. Implement the solution and continue to refine it

A. Define the Problem

Einstein said you cannot solve a problem until you define it. Defining a problem is frequently the hardest part of the solution, and most of us jump into solving the problem rather than defining the problem. However, the process of defining the problem also contains the seeds of the solution.

The first thing we want to do to help team members resolve conflict is to go through the process of defining the problem *together*. Once we've done that, and it's not always easy, we can work on a solution. Problem definition may change or become refined during data-gathering, and may be further refined during the problem-solving process itself. That's OK.

One way to work on a problem statement is to write it down multiple times in different ways and from different perspectives. Just this exercise is beneficial for a team because it allows for different perspectives. A key to success during team interactions is first to establish how the team will operate together. These might be considered "rules of engagement" or ROE. ROE might include statements about professional conduct, taking turns, and not interrupting. If we worked as a team to describe the problems in Scenario B above, we might come up with the following statements:
- The project team is missing assignments
- Team meetings are non-productive
- Some team members are not doing their jobs
- Some people are always late to meetings
- Team leadership is not strong enough
- The team is not working together effectively

When we allow ourselves to look at the problem from different perspectives and through different statements, we can begin to agree on which statement most reflects the real problem. In Scenario B, we see that each of the statements describes a part of the problem. We might agree that the last one is a good general description of what's going on. Each of the other statements helps us to break down the problem into more manageable chunks for work assignments. We've used a good process for problem definition, and now we have a problem statement with sub-headings. We have used a good process for problem definition and are more equipped to develop a solution.

The team is not working together effectively (problem statement)
- The project team is missing assignments. (sub-headings)
- Team meetings are non-productive.
- Some team members are not doing their jobs.
- Some people are always late to meetings.
- Team leadership is not strong enough

B. Gather Data

The second step to addressing team conflict is to gather data on what is actually occurring. This means collecting facts that can be substantiated, not hearsay or opinions. The intent is to gather facts that are actual, observable, and measurable. It also means observing first-hand through meetings, teleconferencing, or video conferencing. We need to know about individual performances, who's meeting deadlines and goals, who works independently, who needs a lot of "face" time, who comes up with good ideas, who initiates, who takes on extra work or goes that extra mile, who's inside or outside of the group, who lunches together, and who are our informal leaders. We can see that this data- gathering is the manager's job and requires discretion. Data

gathering means gathering facts that can be substantiated and proven. Hearsay and opinions are just that and cannot be used. Our intent is to gather facts, which are actual observable and measurable behavior.

Let's return to our project team scenario, Scenario B, and the problem statement with sub-headings. During data gathering, we may uncover other symptoms or causes of conflict. In turn, these may require us to refine or re-define our problem statement. Having to refine or change a problem statement is not a negative. It just means that our understanding of the situation has increased, and this new knowledge may require us to adjust our problem statement. That's okay.

Another part of data gathering is to review what I, as manager, have been doing. How do I communicate with my team? How do they communicate with each other? Are team members clear on roles and responsibilities? Have I been providing regular performance feedback to them? Have I been visible, available, and supportive? Do I "know" my employees? Do I have a good understanding of individual job roles, skills, experience, and what motivates each employee?

This is hard to look at, but I have to do it as part of understanding what's wrong and how to fix it. I may not really know how to do some of these things. I may need to talk with my boss or a good mentor. Part of the solution may be my plan to develop and augment my skills. It's rare that team conflict is associated only with team members. We as managers have to be confident and objective enough to look at ourselves as part of the problem and part of the solution.

C. Analyze the Data and Diagnose

We have now defined the problem, and we have gathered the facts. Before we begin to analyze the data, let's be sure that everything we've gathered so far makes sense. Do we have observable and verifiable facts? Are we clear about symptoms and potential causes? Have we separated management and employee causes and issues? If so, we are ready to analyze.

Analyzing the data means we can diagnose what is going on with the team itself, and determine the role the manager is playing. Let's assume we've completed a self-assessment and know what we, as manager, have to do to help solve the problem. To diagnose team dynamics and performance, let's use this list to stimulate our thinking.

Poor or no communications:
- What kind of communications is occurring?
- Is it effective or non-productive?
- Have I established a style and/or methodology for communications to ensure that everyone on the team is updated on a regular basis? Do I have a communications plan?
- Do I model good communications when I work with the team or with individuals, (i.e., do I listen and communicate effectively)?
- Do I, or my team, need help with communications? What kind of help?

Lack of problem-solving skills, or getting to the "root cause":
- How do we approach problems and issues?
- Do we approach them in a logical way?
- Do we capture data as we problem-solve or is it a haphazard, uncoordinated session that does not resolve issues and does not seek input from all team members?
- Do we need to change how we try to solve problems?
- Do we really address root cause or do we deal with symptoms?

Lack of clarity in purpose, goals, objectives, team and individual roles:
- Do all team members understand their individual roles and the role of each team member?
- Does each member of the team understand his or her roles and goals (what they were hired to do and tasked to accomplish)?
- Do team members understand how individual roles and goals support group goals?
- Do they understand how the group goals roll up to support the larger group's goals and all the way up to support Corporate group goals?

Uncertainty about or lack of resources and sources for help and support:
- Do team members each understand their strengths and what they contribute to the team?
- Are they clear about where to go for help and support, which involves clarifying team roles regarding special skills and helping each other?
- Are they committed to helping each other within the scope of their responsibilities, (i.e., NOT actually doing the work of the other person but providing assistance or guidance)?
- Do team members rely on me as the manager to ensure they have the resources they need to meet individual and team goals?

Poor time management:
- Are team members usually able to meet goals and deadlines?
- Do they have time management skills or are they always late or always behind?
- Are they clear about what kind of time management is expected?
- What kind of mentoring or guidance do I as a manager provide to individuals to ensure they meet goals?
- What could help them to improve their time management skills?

Lack of leadership and management:
- As a manager, have I been clear regarding my expectations of individuals and the team?
- Do I give feedback regularly that helps them to understand how they're meeting my expectations?
- Do I provide corrective guidance when it's necessary?
- Do I support them in public and remonstrate in private?
- Do I model the kind of behavior I expect from my team?

Team members bored, not challenged, not really interested:
- Does each team member have a career plan?
- Can I detect a lack of interest or commitment?
- Where is boredom or lack of interest or commitment coming from?
- Am I, as manager, sufficiently aware of individual career plans and performance to determine if an individual needs a change, a challenge, or corrective action?
- Do I delegate effectively?
- How am I motivating my team?

Lack of skills and abilities of team members to meet goals:
- Are team members matched well in their roles?
- Do they have the skills and abilities to perform their assigned tasks?
- Do they need special training and how is this in line with career goals?
- What kind of guidance can I, as manager, provide?

Personality conflicts:
- Are team members able to work effectively with each other?
- Are there any who just cannot get along?
- Do I treat all team members fairly regardless of my own personal feelings about each?
- Have we, as a team, developed a "conflict resolution" process or strategy" that we can understand and use effectively?

Personal problems:
- Are personal problems interfering with job performance – theirs or mine?
- Am I aware of personal problems of individuals?
- Am I encouraging individuals to go to Human Resources (HR) or to find the help and support they need, (i.e., I'm not trying to solve problems outside of my expertise)?
- How am I working with these individuals to get their work done through flexible schedules, reduced workloads, assistance from others, allowing delays, other approaches, or some combination?
- Am I, as a manager, working with HR to be fair to the individual, to the company, and to my group?

Turnover:
- What is my turnover rate?
- What are the causes of turnover?
- What is the impact of team conflict in causing people to leave?
- Are the causes of turnover beyond my control (i.e., economic factors, competition, locale, etc.)?
- Are the causes within my control, ie, some of the above factors?
- If some of the above factors are observable in my group, how will I proceed?

As we perform our diagnosis, we develop a more precise understanding of team dynamics. Instead of just saying we have poor communications, we can focus in on details. As we analyze each area, we can see two things: further problem definition, and the beginnings of our plan to fix things. As managers, we all have our own skills and abilities and tools we like to use. Use whatever works for you. You might simply ask yourself these questions and capture your answers. A checklist may be appropriate, or a diagram, or flow chart. Your framework or outline for your plan will depend upon you as an individual and your experience as a manager. Those factors also will determine the point when you involve your team members.

D. Choose the Best Solution

As we gather and analyze our data, we have begun to separate it into discrete areas such as communications, turnover, etc. We are getting down to "root causes" versus symptoms. We are really defining what's wrong. With answers to questions in each area, we can focus in on distinct areas of the problem. We can work on solutions and then choose the best solution, or solutions, to implement. We will not have major issues in all areas. Plus, addressing some areas, such as leadership, role and responsibility clarification, and communications, will likely improve other areas.

How do we select the best solution? Look at each of the areas again – plus issues you've thought of. Consider what you've observed. If necessary, go out and observe some more. Write down your notes on observable behaviors. Reflect on them. Consider the impact of individual behaviors on team members, on how team members talk and work together, and how they interact with each other in meetings. Results will help you to determine which ones are the best solutions for your team's particular problems. Talk with your boss or mentor and reflect together. Let's face it. We can't always be right the first time. If we try something and it doesn't work, we can perform a "lessons-learned analysis" and try again.

E. Implement the Solution and Continue To Refine It

Through the work we've already done, we have the seeds of our "get-well" plan. After we analyze the data and develop solutions, we select the best solution for our problem areas and begin to construct a plan. This plan will include actions to address each problem area, and will include a schedule for implementation with measurements. Work on one or two areas versus trying to fix everything at once.

Let's look again at Scenario A. In the past Fred has been one of our best performers. Now he is missing work, missing deadlines, and becoming defensive. We know this is not at all like the Fred we know. Our solution is to observe and gather facts and set up a meeting with Fred. During this meeting, we need to find out what's changed in Fred's life. Are there issues at home? Is he bored? Are there issues at work? After listening to him to find out what's going on, we need to work on a plan to get the work done and make sure he understands our expectations along with deadlines and measurements. We might meet with him on a regular basis until the issues are resolved and his performance improves. We also need to observe his impact on the team. If not corrected, his impact on the team will increase and poison the team. Morale and productivity will decline. The goal of our intervention with Fred is to support him and improve his performance, while also demonstrating to the team how we will work with team members on performance issues. Working with Fred demonstrates our leadership. It tells him and the rest of the team that we are aware of issues, we are available, we hold each team member accountable, and we will support them toward problem and conflict resolution and performance improvement.

As we develop our plan and/or begin implementation we may need help. We need to talk with our manager or to a mentor or someone trustworthy with the appropriate skills, or we could go to a class. We have to look at our management style and how it's working. We need to keep our minds open to finding the best solution and plan for our team.

The process for this is part of the solution. Thinking and considering in an ordered and systematic process is crucial to defining and solving the problem. Working together to define and correct causes of conflict is the best solution to resolve team conflict. Are there tools and aids to help teams deal with conflict quickly and effectively? Yes. In defining the problem, gathering data, analyzing that data, and selecting and implementing the best solution, we've begun to develop a list of tools and skills to use to resolve conflict. Here are other tools and skills that can help:
- Clearly articulate thoughts and ideas
- Active listening
- Paraphrasing
- Clarify and question effectively
- Give effective feedback
- Think and analyze in a methodical and systematic way
- Set clear, reasonable, achievable objectives
- Identify risks and assumptions
- Build contingencies to counter risks and assumptions
- Stick to facts and issues, not personalities or personal issues
- Take turns
- Develop the ability to work effectively as a team member
- Cross training
- Use of 'rules of engagement' where helpful or necessary
- Delegating and mentoring for senior employees

- Time management
- Conflict resolution

How do you, as a manager, help employees to develop these skills and tools? One way is through modeling the behavior desired. Another is through coaching. Another is to directly state what is required. Still another is through training. As a manager, we can work with our team to develop a process that is acceptable for conflict resolution. Below is an example of a simple conflict resolution process.

Conflict Resolution

Step 1

The first step is for individuals to try to resolve the conflict with each other. We might need to perform some coaching first. Or, we may need to listen to each side independently. This will help each individual to sort out their thoughts and feelings before the one-on-one. Being able to resolve conflict with each other helps individuals to learn how to confront each other, clearly state the issue, listen to each other, and work together to find a mutually acceptable solution. The benefit is that individuals learn a highly critical skill for now and the future, and become more valuable team members.

Step 2

If the two individuals are not successful with a one-on-one meeting, we may need to intercede. If we have not already met with each person, we would do that first. Then we would bring the two people together with clear goals and an expected outcome. There should be rules or guidelines as to how the meeting will be conducted and how they are expected to behave. This latter step about behavior may not be required in all instances, but we all know that sometimes we have to be very explicit about what will and will not be tolerated.

Step 3

If Step 2 doesn't work, or if the conflict involves us as manager, the next step is to involve Human Resources. Human Resource people generally have excellent skills and/or have contacts with people who specialize in mediation and conflict resolution for conflict situations requiring this level of expertise.

4. What Tools Can I Use To Help My Team Deal with Conflict Quickly and Effectively

These tools and may also be helpful and may be used as part of ROE:
- Attack the problem, not the person
- Focus on what can be done, not on what can't be done
- Encourage different points of view and honest dialogue
- Express feelings in a way that does not blame
- Accept ownership appropriately for all or part of the problem
- Listen to understand the other person's point of view before giving your own
- Show respect for the other person's point of view
- Solve the problem while building the relationship

When conflict arises during a team meeting, it is important to address it as soon as possible. If the conflict has nothing to do with the topic at hand, defer it to a later time. If conflict gets extremely overheated, take a break and let everyone cool off.

Conclusion

Is it possible to maintain a conflict-free team environment? The simple answer is "no". Every team has internal conflicts at some points. However, team conflict is not always negative. It can be destructive, or it can be healthy and productive. How it's handled is the key. How a manager leads a team and helps the team to manage the conflict can change a negative to a positive, as in our Scenarios A and B.

Sometimes conflict can force teams and managers to look at themselves or issues in a new way, producing solutions and results far better than originally anticipated. The conflict in this situation can act as a catalyst—again, based upon how it is handled. Productive conflict occurs when team members are able to disagree and continue to dialogue. It requires skill and maturity to achieve this, and it can be learned. When conflict is channeled positively the results can produce:
- Alternatives not yet considered
- Better solutions
- A focused and productive team
- Increased ability to deal with conflict

As a manager, there a number of things you can do to enable your team to deal effectively with conflict:
- Use your powers of observation
- Use your Active Listening skills
- Do everything you can to minimize potential conflict, ie, (the "causes of conflict" checklist)
- Establish tools and processes to minimize team conflict (i.e. communications plan, conflict resolution process, regular meetings, and good communications skills)
- When conflict does occur, deal with it immediately
- Have appropriate team get-togethers to celebrate successes, recognize accomplishments, and reward achievements

Handle team conflict with skill and confidence. You and your team will achieve your goals and improve your ability to deal with conflict.

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About the Author

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