If we manage conflict constructively, we harness its energy for creativity and development.”

-Kenneth Kaye, American Psychologist and Writer

What do you think when you hear the word “conflict?” Often, we equate it to a war somewhere around the globe. Perhaps it calls to mind plot twists in your favorite novels. There are actually several definitions for the word in various textbooks and dictionaries. Michael Nicholson, British journalist and ITN Foreign Correspondent, defines it as “an activity which takes place when individuals or groups wish to carry out mutually inconsistent acts concerning their wants, needs or obligations.”

For the purposes of this discussion, we will be talking about opposing viewpoints or actions that take place among team members in the workplace.

First, we need to recognize that not all conflict is bad. Often differences of opinion can be channeled into constructive conflict, leading to creative solutions for issues that arise. Unfortunately, conflict can become very destructive to team performance if not managed correctly. Sophia Jowett, who researches social and sport psychology, differentiates between content conflict, where individuals disagree about how to deal with a certain issue, and relational conflict, where individuals disagree about one another. She notes that the content conflict can be beneficial, increasing motivation and stimulating discussion, whereas the relational conflicts decrease performance, loyalty, satisfaction, and commitment, and cause individuals to be irritable, negative, and suspicious.

As teams are formed, they go through various stages in their development. Conflict is very common in the early stages of this shaping process as team members begin to find their own niche and understand how they will relate to the rest of the team members. This conflict is often low-level and resolves itself as team members settle into their respective roles and begin working together. A high-performance team will become interdependent as they collaborate to achieve project goals. Even in this highly evolved state, however, conflicts will arise.

Conflict normally involves opposing views on one or more of the following:

- Commodities
- Relationships
- Territory
- Principles
Factors that cause the highest likelihood of conflict on project teams revolve around the areas of costs, schedule, resources, and priorities. Technical differences of opinion or interpretations of policies and procedures can also create conflict. Rounding out the list are personality clashes.

Personality clashes may be due to actual or perceived injustices. Some examples of this are:

- An uneven distribution of workload
- Unequal treatment
- Personality differences
- A lack of recognition

Many of us work in project-based environments where the Project Manager (PM) leads the team. It falls to the PM to deal with conflicts as they occur.

By investing time with the team in the beginning of a new project, the PM may prevent many conflicts. When team members know expectations and the assigned deliverables and authority, they feel more secure and empowered to do their best. Team members bring varying strengths to the table. When they are assured that their talents and abilities are to be utilized, they feel more engaged in the team activities and results.

All this careful attention will not completely prevent conflict from occurring, however. It will be up to the PM to facilitate the resolution of issues that arise.

There are several methods of resolving conflict that have been identified and studied.

First, let’s briefly cover the methods that are not the best way to handle conflict that may arise on your team. If any of these methods are your default style, you may recognize yourself in these descriptions. By recognizing how you normally deal with conflict, it gives you the opportunity to understand alternatives that may work better for you in the future.

- Avoiding – When you avoid the situation (or withdraw entirely), team members often find it hard to identify and resolve the root cause of the dispute.
- Smoothing – Smoothing is finding something external with the issue that the team members all agree to. Merely stating that “We want the best for our customer” might garner agreement on both sides. However, unless the underlying issue is discussed and resolved, true interdependent work effort may never occur.
- Forcing – Often as a PM, it may be tempting to use your authority to “force” an action or result. This is not an effective long-term strategy. You may disenfranchise the team member(s) and will not achieve that cohesive, high-performing team that is desired. This is the least desirable method of conflict resolution.

There is another method that is not optimal, but is frequently used in the workplace today – compromising. According to Thomas Crum, author and speaker, when conflict becomes a win-lose situation in our minds, we immediately try to win. This makes negotiation (and compromise) difficult. This is not one of the best ways to handle conflict, because frequently, a good, but not optimal outcome is the result.
There are more effective ways of dealing with conflicts that occur.

- Collaboration – This occurs when team members recognize the conflict, but actively agree to cooperate for positive results. PMs can facilitate this by encouraging open discussion and reinforcing team goals.

- Confrontation – This is the best method for handling project team conflict. This moves the situation to the open so it can be addressed directly. As clinicians, we understand the value of treating the illness, not merely masking the symptoms. The same analogy applies here. Once problems are fully identified, all sides heard, and decisions made that will resolve the issue, the team mentality of “working together” can be reestablished.

The PM will have many choices to make as s/he manages his team through the project stages and on to a successful outcome. The key to doing this successfully is through good communication. This is the key to maintain a healthy team environment where team members feel respected and contribute their best efforts to ensure exceptional results for our clients.

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REFERENCES


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