



Managing Conflict Amongst Teams

Conflict in the Workplace

Many business leaders acknowledge their teams experience significant conflicts that deter progress or contribute to complete failure of a project. According to CPP research, an estimated \$359 billion in paid hours are lost to conflict in the workplace. Leaders are now trying to address these conflicts before they start affecting the team. The first step to solving unhealthy conflict on teams is to find the root of the disagreement. With over 25+ years of experience in the field, The Executive Edge has seen that the root of most conflicts in the workplace result from an emotional reaction that is not handled well. It is the combination of different personalities in one workplace and the way people communicate with one another that often cause most problems.



85% of employees deal with conflict on some level 2

Different personalities with vastly different perspectives can contribute to conflict; however, conflict can also be very healthy as different perspectives are needed for project success. To handle conflict appropriately, leaders need to understand how others deal with conflict on a personal level. The way a person addresses conflict is a result of past experiences, how he/she was taught to deal with issues, and the environment he/she was raised in. Leaders who recognize and respond to these three factors show great potential and amazing team progress.



Understanding the Root Causes of Conflict

Many employees learn how to handle conflict from previous projects and teams. They can learn from a good/bas boss or colleague. A major issue with this is there is no “One size fits all” approach to managing conflict on a team. Teams are complicated and comprised of numerous personalities which led to a goal of diversified yet common ideas. To achieve this goal, members need to be self-aware before they can adjust their own conflict style.

Past Work Experiences

An extremely common way of approaching conflict comes from how a team member dealt with it on another team. Unfortunately, a negative experience carries a greater weight than a smooth team experience. For example, if in a prior team, a team member missed an important deadline leading to failure of a project, a member from the team is likely to take a harsher stance on dividing work. Trust is a key factor in how a team functions and each member must rely on one another to build an A team. Another extremely common cause of conflict is due to differences in their comfort level with conflict. Should this problem arise in a team, the leader can administer an MBTI, DISC, or Forté and share the results with the team as it will increase transparency and discussion within the team. Learning more about team members’ conflict preferences and how they derive their opinions on a project will build team cohesion and lead to greater efficiency.

How They Were Raised

Another factor that affects how a team member approaches conflict is how he/she was raised. People handle authority very differently from one family to another. In some households, conflict is openly accepted and even encouraged with the goal of understanding each other. However, many homes discourage children to share controversial opinions with parents as it may show a lack of respect. These different conflict norms often carried into the workplace as some people choose to avoid conflict altogether and some see conflict as natural. Holding back your opinion in your team prevents the team from discovering untapped potential. It is crucial for everyone to feel respected on the team as teams are meant to have disagreements and learn from each other to make better team discussions.

Cultural Differences

Cultural differences play a large role in how people manage conflict on teams. In some cultures, people are taught to respect authority and refrain from disagreeing as it is seen as a lack of respect. In other cultures, people are encouraged to disagree and share opinions as it is a means for progress. To truly understand a team, a leader must be able to understand each person’s background, experiences, preferred work styles and personally encourage all voices to be heard.

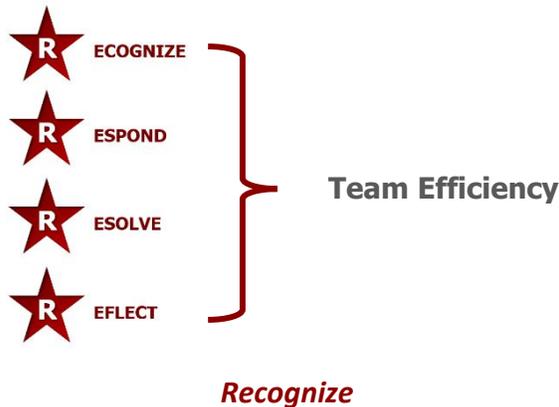
“If we manage conflict constructively, we harness its energy for creativity and development.”

**-Kenneth
Kaye**

Turning Conflict into Healthy Progress

Leadership Strategies: The Four R's

When evaluating how to approach destructive conflict in a team, one should think of the Four R's – recognize, respond, resolve, and reflect. Each of these steps help address the conflict before it becomes an even larger problem for the team. The following model teaches leaders how to handle conflict in a team environment without escalating the situation further.



The first and most likely most important step to managing conflict amongst teams is recognizing the problem. Leaders must be able to identify when there is an arising issue that will cause the team harm whether it be power issues, a lack of respect among team members, personality disagreements, mistrust, competing strategic opinions, etc. A savvy leader has the emotional intelligence to recognize the clues his/her team members are giving. Here are five easy ways to identify if there is a rising problem in a team. 3

- Individuals have different objectives
- Unhealthy levels of competition
- Roles are not clearly defined
- Workflow has been disrupted
- Breakdowns in communication

Using these five common warning signs of a conflict in a team, a leader will be able to take the next step to approaching the conflict – responding. Choosing to look the other way can be destructive as it teaches team members that unhealthy behaviors will be tolerated.

Respond

Before a leader can tackle the conflict head on, he/she must choose how the problem will be managed. Knowing how to respond and address the conflict can be just as important as initially recognizing it. A leader must approach the situation cautiously to prevent further escalation of the conflict. To diffuse any tension amongst the team, a leader should seek to emphasize with each member and promote unity in the group through establishing a common goal. A common way to solve relationship problems in a group is to take each member aside and assess his/her priorities. Understanding what motivates each team member can strengthen the team if every member is open and truthful with the group.

“10% of conflicts are due to difference in opinion. 90% are due to wrong tone of voice.”

Resolve

Resolving conflict is crucial for forward progress on a team. To begin solving a conflict, a leader must address the root of the problem whether it be a relationship issue, personal egos, mistrust, etc. After, the leader needs to demonstrate how it is preventing the team from succeeding toward the common goal. Shifting a focus from negative behavior to something positive like a common goal will unite the group once again. Once the team is refocused, it may bring heightened energy, increase healthy levels of competition, and drive commitment.

Reflect

A must for all teams after solving a conflict is taking time to reflect. Begin to understand why the unhealthy conflict arose in the first place and talk through how the team may avoid this in the future. If teams are able to do this for each issue that occurs, a team bond is built, and it allows for the group to make more progress than ever before.

Healthy vs Destructive Conflict

Destructive Conflict:

Destructive conflict occurs when it inhibits the team from moving forward. This kind of conflict negatively impacts the team through a lack of respect toward team members, personal egos, trust, miscommunication, etc. The following are examples of destructive behaviors that will eventually deter team progress.

- Eye rolling
- Interrupting others
- Not listening
- Closed body language
- Combative tone
- Constant pessimism
- Name calling

All negative behaviors (Eye rolling, personal attacks, condescending tone of voice, name calling, etc.) must be addressed by the leader to make it clear that these norms are counterproductive to teamwork.



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Healthy Conflict:

Healthy conflict occurs when an argument is made in an effort toward team progress. These conflicts turn into unhealthy issues when an argument is made in a combative tone or when a team member disregards a teammate's opinion. Healthy conflict can contribute immensely to a team's success when people learn to respectfully share different opinions and learn to how express them in a non-judgmental manner. Rather than allowing poor behavior to thrive and ruin healthy expression, a leader must encourage everyone to hear others out, refrain from judgment, and draw upon the best ideas of the team.

Bottom Line: Communication

Open communication is crucial for team success as members are able to understand the group's progress. At your next team meeting, discuss how your team approaches conflict and gain their agreement on a team norm that encourages the team to manage the team's points of difference.

Summary

- We must expect that when people of diverse backgrounds and experiences come together, there will be differences of opinion. Find ways to turn differences of opinions into healthy discussions.
- Discover the root causes behind unhealthy team dynamics and address them quickly.
- Use the four R's – recognize, respond, resolve, and reflect as a template on how to work your team through conflict.

References

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