

Managing Team Conflict.

A major advantage a team has over an individual is its diversity of resources, knowledge, and ideas. However, diversity also produces conflict. As more and more organisations restructure to create teams the need for training in conflict management will continue to grow.

It is critical that team managers possess skills to resolve conflict among their teams.

Conflict arises from differences. When individuals come together in teams their differences in terms of power, values and attitudes, and social factors all contribute to the creation of conflict. It is often difficult to expose the sources of conflict.

Conflict can arise from numerous sources within a team setting and generally falls into three categories: communication factors, structural factors and personal factors. Barriers to communication are among the most important factors and can be a major source of misunderstanding.

Communication barriers include poor listening skills; insufficient sharing of information; differences in interpretation and perception; and nonverbal cues being ignored or missed. Structural disagreements include the size of the organisation, turnover rate, levels of participation, reward systems, and levels of interdependence among employees. Personal factors include things such as an individual's self-esteem, their personal goals, values and needs. In order for conflict to be dealt with successfully, managers and team members must understand its unpredictability and its impact on individuals and the team as a whole.

Conflict in work teams is not necessarily destructive, however and conflict can lead to new ideas and approaches. Conflict, in this sense, can be considered positive, as it facilitates the surfacing of important issues and provides opportunities for people to develop their communication and interpersonal skills. Conflict becomes negative when it is left to escalate to the point where people begin to feel defeated and a combative climate of distrust and suspicion develops. Team members can and should attempt to avoid negative conflict from occurring. Being aware of the potential for negative conflict to occur, and taking the necessary steps to ensure good planning will help.

Handling Negative Conflict.

When negative conflict does occur there are five accepted methods for handling it:

Direct Approach, Bargaining, Enforcement, Retreat, and De-emphasis.

Each can be used effectively in different circumstances.

Direct Approach:

This may be the best approach of all. It concentrates on the leader confronting the issue head-on. Though conflict is uncomfortable to deal with, it is best to look at issues objectively and to face them as they are. If criticism is used, it must be constructive to the recipients. This approach counts on the techniques of problem-solving and normally leaves everyone with a sense of resolution, because issues are brought to the surface and dealt with.

Bargaining:

This is an excellent technique when both parties have ideas on a solution yet cannot find common ground. Often a third party, such as a team leader, is needed to help find the compromise.

Compromise involves give and take on both sides, however, and usually ends up with both walking away equally dissatisfied.

Enforcement of Team Rules:

Avoid using this method if possible as it can bring about hard feelings toward the leader and the team. This technique is only used when it is obvious that a member does not want to be a team player and refuses to work with the rest. If enforcement has to be used on an individual, it may be best for that person to find another team.

Retreat:

Only use this method when the problem isn't real to begin with. By simply avoiding it or working around it, a leader can often delay long enough for the individual to cool off. When used in the right environment by an experienced leader this technique can help to prevent minor incidents that are the result of someone having a bad day from becoming real problems that should never have occurred.

De-emphasis:

This is a form of bargaining where the emphasis is on the areas of agreement. When parties realise that there are areas where they are in agreement, they can often begin to move in a new direction.

Managing Cooperative Conflict:

Though we often view conflict through a negative lens, teams require some conflict to operate effectively. Cooperative conflict can contribute to effective problem solving and decision making by motivating people to examine a problem. Encouraging the expression of many ideas; energising people to seek a superior solution; and fostering integration of several ideas to create high-quality solutions.

The key is to understand how to handle it constructively. If members understand how to do it, differences that arise can result in benefits for a team.

While it is true that suppressed differences can reduce the effectiveness of a team, when they are brought to the surface, disagreements can be dealt with and problems can be resolved. The actual process of airing differences can help to increase the cohesiveness and effectiveness of the team through the increased interest and energy that often accompanies it. This in turn fosters creativity and intensity among team members. In addition, bringing differences to the surface can result in better ideas and more innovative solutions. When people share their views and strive toward reaching a consensus, better decisions are reached. Team members also improve their communication skills and become better at understanding and listening to the information they receive when differences are freely aired.

Team Resolution Process:

Conflict should first be handled on an informal basis between the individuals involved. This will allow time for resolution or self-correction by the individuals. If the conflict remains unsettled, a mediator can be brought in to help resolve the situation. If resolution is still not achieved the dispute should be openly discussed in a team meeting. A formal discipline process needs to occur, if resolution is not achieved after being addressed at the team level.

The escalating process of Team Resolution is as follows

Collaboration (One-on-one):

Handle the new problem person-to-person. Use as many facts as possible and relate the issue to customer, team, or organizational needs. Be open and honest and conduct the session in a private setting. Document the concerns or issues, the dates, and the resolution, if any, and have both parties sign it

Mediation (One-on-one with Mediator): If collaboration did not work or was inappropriate, handle the problem with a mediator. The mediator must be trained in conflict resolution, understand policy and ethics, be trusted by the team, and have the ability to remain neutral. Gather facts and talk over the issue with the people involved. Bring up as many facts as possible and relate the issue to customer, team, or organisational needs. Be open and honest and conduct the mediation session in private. Document it and have all parties sign.

Team Counselling:

The conflict is now a definite issue to the team. Collaboration and/or Mediation could not be done, were not appropriate, or did not work. Handle the conflict at a team meeting; put the problem on the next agenda and invite the necessary individuals. Again, bring up the facts; relate the issue to customer, team, or organisational needs. Be open and honest, discuss it in a private setting, document it, and have all parties sign it. Anyone on the team can put an issue or problem on the team agenda, however, this step should be used only after Collaboration, and Mediation has been ruled out.

For individuals to work effectively in teams they must be able to clearly communicate their ideas, to listen, and be willing to disagree. Although it is difficult, learning to appreciate each other's differences reflects a team's ability to manage conflict. When conflict occurs we must not turn our backs and hope it will go away. Instead, we must learn to tolerate it, even welcome it, for well-managed conflict can be the source of change and innovation.

This article was written by Performance Coach, Allan Mackintosh and was part of the May 2007 'Build A Successful Team' e-newsletter. You can subscribe to the newsletter via www.teambuildersinternational.com