



# CSWT Papers

## Resolving Conflict in Work Teams

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### Abstract

As organizations continue to restructure to work teams, the need for training in conflict resolution will grow. Conflict arises from differences, and when individuals come together in teams, their differences in terms of power, values, and attitudes contribute to the creation of conflict. To avoid the negative consequences that can result from disagreements, most methods of resolving conflict stress the importance of dealing with disputes quickly and openly. Conflict is not necessarily destructive, however. When managed properly, conflict can result in benefits for a team.

### Resolving Conflict in Work Teams

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 organizations restructure to work teams the need for training in conflict resolution will continue to grow. Varney (1989) reports that conflict remained the number-one problem for most of the teams operating within a large energy company, even after repeated training sessions on how to resolve conflict and how to minimize the negative impact on team members. One reason for this may be that managers and other leaders within organizations are not giving the issue of resolving conflict enough attention. Varney's research showed that although most managers are aware of disagreements and have received training in conflict resolution, they seldom assign a high priority to solving conflict problems. With this in mind, it is critical that team members possess skills to resolve conflict among themselves.

Conflict arises from differences. When individuals come together in work 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 (Varney, 1989). 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 organization, 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. Conflict can lead to new ideas and approaches to organizational processes, and increased interest in dealing with problems. 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 (Bowditch & Buono, 1997). Nelson (1995) cautions that negative conflict can destroy a team quickly, and often arises from poor planning. He offers this list of high potential areas from which negative conflict issues commonly arise:

1. **Administrative Procedures:** If the team lacks good groundwork for what it's doing, its members will not be able to coordinate their work.
2. **People Resources:** If the team does not have enough resources to do the job, it is inevitable that some will carry too heavy a load. Resentment, often unexpressed, may build, so it is crucial that team leaders ensure adequate resources.
3. **Cost overruns:** Often inevitable, cost overruns become a problem when proper measures are not taken. The whole team should know early on when cost becomes a problem so additional funding can be sought by the team. This way the problem can be resolved before it grows into a problem for management.
4. **Schedules:** The schedule is highly consequential to the team's project and should be highly visible. All members should be willing to work together to help each other meet their deadlines.
5. **Responsibilities:** Each team member must know what areas are assigned and who is accountable for them.
6. **Wish Lists:** Stick to the project at hand and avoid being sidetracked into trying to fit other things into it. Wait and do the other things you would like to do after successful completion of the original project.

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 (Nelson, 1995). Each can be used effectively in different circumstances.

1. **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.
2. **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.
3. **Enforcement of Team Rules:** Avoid using this method if possible, 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.
4. **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.

5. De-emphasis: This is a form of bargaining where the emphasis is on the areas of agreement. When parties realize 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; energizing people to seek a superior solution; and fostering integration of several ideas to create high-quality solutions (Tjosvold, 1988). 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. Fisher, Belgard, and Rayner (1995) offer these tips on improving listening skills:

1. Listen for meaning.
2. Understanding is not agreeing.
3. Seek clarification before responding, if needed.
4. Apply listening skills when receiving a message.
5. Evaluate yourself for how well you listened at the end of any conversation.

The tension of well-managed conflict allows teams to confront disagreement through healthy discussion and improve the decisions made (Rayeski & Bryant, 1994). This leads to greater team efficiency and effectiveness. Effectively managing conflict allows teams to stay focused on their goals. Swift and constructive conflict management leads to a broader understanding of the problem, healthy expression of different ideas or alternatives, and creates excitement from the positive interaction and involvement which will help the team through periods of transition and on to greater levels of performance.

As teams become more responsible for managing themselves, it is important for organizations to help them by identifying the knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) required to handle conflict. Then developing plans to transfer these skills and capabilities over to their teams. Because conflict is inevitable in teams, the focus needs to be on how it is managed. Conflict that is poorly handled creates an environment of fear and avoidance of the subject. On the other hand, if properly managed, it can lead to learning, creativity, and growth.

### **Team Resolution Process**

Rayeski and Bryant (1994) recommend using the Team Resolution Process to handle conflict when it occurs in teams. Conflict should first be handled on an informal basis between the individuals involved. This, they say, 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:

1. **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.
2. **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 organizational needs. Be open and honest and conduct the mediation session in private. Document it and have all parties sign.
3. **Team Counseling:** 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 organizational 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.

Because every team is different, disputes that arise will be too. However, Stulberg (1987) recognizes patterns common to all controversies. He calls them the Five-P's of Conflict Management:

1. **Perceptions:** People associate conflict with negative responses such as anger, fear, tension, and anxiety. Rarely do we perceive any benefits from being involved in a dispute. Our negative perceptions impact our approach in resolving conflict as we strive to eliminate the source of these negative feelings.
2. **Problems:** Anyone can be involved in a conflict, and the amount of time, money, and equipment needed for resolution will vary according to its complexity.
3. **Processes:** There are different ways to go about resolving disputes: Suppress the conflict, give in, fight, litigate, mediate, etc.
4. **Principles:** We determine the priorities of all resolution processes on the basis of an analysis of our fundamental values regarding efficiency, participation, fairness, compliance, etc.
5. **Practices:** Power, self-interest, and unique situations are all factors relating to why people resolve disputes the way they do.

Stulberg proposed these patterns as an aid for formal mediators, but anyone dealing with conflict can benefit from understanding the elements common to disagreements.

## **Negotiation**

Although there are common patterns, there is no one best way to deal with conflict. Disputes arise for different reasons and every team is unique. Varney (1989) proposes that negotiation is the most effective response to conflict when both parties stand to gain something, each has some power, and there is interdependency. Negotiation offers flexibility and viability other responses, such as Avoidance, Confrontation, and Diffusion lack. The process of negotiation involves listening to both sides, seeking out common areas of interest and agreement, and building on them so that individuals can understand each other's points of view. Varney

believes there are four essential skills team leaders need to learn and apply to effectively resolve disagreements using the negotiation process:

1. Diagnosis: Recognizing areas of understanding and areas of differences.
2. Initiation: Bringing the disagreements to the surface.
3. Listening: Hearing not only what the other person is saying, but the Emotional aspects as well.
4. Problem Solving: A process with numerous steps including data gathering, Considering its impact, examining alternatives, identifying solutions, and developing a plan of action.

In order to resolve their differences, Varney (1989) recommends bringing the parties together and, with the assistance of a third party, asking the following questions:

1. What is the problem, as you perceive it?
2. What does the other person do that contributes to the problem?
3. What do you want or need from the other person?
4. What do you do that contributes to the problem?
5. What first step can you take to resolve the problem?

Each party should be questioned while the other listens, asking questions only for clarification. Then the parties discuss a mutual definition and understanding of the problem. They should be allowed to express their feelings and get hostility out of their systems at this stage, but both parties must be willing to admit partial responsibility for the problem. This requires good listening, low defensiveness, and an ability to stay in a problem-solving mode. Agreement should be reached on what steps will be taken to resolve the problem, and should be put in writing in order to prevent later misunderstandings.

The key to Varney's negotiation process is exposing the different positions as early as possible. If conflict is left to simmer and then erupt into open warfare, it becomes much more difficult to resolve. Revealing the sources of conflict early on enables people to understand the facts of the dispute, before emotions get the upper hand, which may allow them to more easily see their areas of agreement. When agreement areas are identified, people can then work toward arriving at a consensus and develop a process for resolving problems in the future.

Fisher et al. (1995) offers a similar five-step approach to resolving conflict.

1. Acknowledge that the conflict exists.
2. Gain common ground by putting the conflict in perspective with the goals and purpose of the team.
3. Seek to understand all angles of the disagreement, keeping in mind that understanding is different from agreement.
4. Attack the issue, not each other. Channel anger and hostility into problem solving and action planning.
5. Develop an action plan describing what each person will do to solve the problem.

This method allows both parties to acknowledge the nature of the conflict, then jointly work toward resolving it. As with Varney's (1989) approach, the key to this process is responding quickly and effectively when conflict presents itself. Teams are cautioned to avoid covering up painful issues. Sooner or later, unresolved issues tend to resurface, often in uglier forms than before. Along the same lines, teams should not automatically defer an issue to management, as this disempowers the team. Instead, they should learn how to handle disputes themselves, requesting help from management only when their own attempts at resolution have failed. Fisher et al. (1995) stress that team members should be encouraged to voice their concerns in team meetings rather than outside the team setting, in an attempt to avoid what they call the AParking Lot Commentary (p. 212). This

happens when team members are afraid to voice feelings to the team so they begin to talk about team issues in conversations with individuals. When this occurs it undermines the trust and integrity of the team.

### **Sources of Conflict Among Project Teams**

Though the recognition that conflict can be productive is not new ( for example, Coser, 1956; Deutsh, 1969), some of the conflict issues that organizations are dealing with are. For instance, one study (Kezsbom, 1992) looked at sources of conflict among project teams and found that the number one issue developed from goals and priority issues. Previous literature (Posner, 1986; Thamhain & Wilemon, 1975) presented the number one source of conflict as being disagreements over schedules, which ranked at number seven in Kezsbom's study. It makes sense that goals and priority issues have risen on the list as organizations have evolved into multi-project, streamlined environments. In these new complex, hybrid organizations, employees often find themselves serving on a variety of project teams, being led by a variety of project managers while reporting directly to functional managers. This sets the stage for Kezsbom's third conflict category: communication and information flow. When reporting relationships are complex it becomes more difficult to share information.

Personality and interpersonal issues, ranked in the number two category by those in high technology environments, presented another dramatic change from previous studies. This change may be related to the increased use of cross-functional, self-directed teams in which individuals with technical backgrounds must rely on the work of others to get their own work done. This specifically illustrates how important it is to provide training in communication and interpersonal skills to cross-functional team members, while emphasizing an appreciation of the value of differences.

Overall, this study provides valuable insights for organizations, project leaders, and project team members. Because goal and priority issues frequently change, communication must be improved. Kezsbom (1992) makes these recommendations:

1. More frequent and effective upward, downward, and team communications.
2. More frequent meetings and status review sessions to increase communication between functions and minimize inconsistent perceptions of project goals and priorities.
3. Increase human relations training and facilitate more active team-building efforts.

Organizations must be aware that conflict grows from differences, but so does innovation. If project teams are properly trained in human relations and team-building skills, production and quality measures will increase.

No matter what kind of team it is, no method of managing conflict will work without mutual respect and a willingness to disagree and resolve disagreements. Donald Weiss, president of Self-Management Communication, Inc., believes each person on the team must be willing to take the following four steps when a team meeting erupts into a storm (Weiss, 1997): listen, acknowledge, respond, and resolve remaining differences.

1. Listen: To hear what someone else is saying is not the same as listening. To listen effectively means clearing your mind of distractions and concentrating not only on the words but also on nonverbal gestures, which often convey ninety percent of what the person is trying to say. When resolving disagreements, you often have to deal with feelings first.
2. Acknowledge: You can acknowledge people's positions without agreeing with them. Show this with statements like, "I understand that you're angry," "If I understand you, you think we should", or "Let's explore your opinion further." You may still disagree with them, but at least they know you've heard them.
3. Respond: You've listened and acknowledged what the other person is saying. Now it is your turn to be

heard. If you're offering criticism of your teammate's ideas, make sure it's constructive, and if you're disagreeing with them, be ready to offer an alternative. Be willing, also, to be questioned or challenged, while avoiding defensiveness when you answer.

4. Resolve remaining differences: Define the real problem by looking for what's causing the disagreement. Then analyze it into its manageable parts. Now you can generate alternative solutions to the problem and select the alternative on which everyone can agree.

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. As more and more organizations attempt to make the difficult transition to teams, they must develop and provide programs for their employees which offer training in conflict management skills and techniques. I hope the ideas in this paper can help organizations and their teams begin, or continue, this challenging task.

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