

Hidden Potential

Embracing Conflict Can Pay Off for Teams



As more and more organizations rely on teams and teamwork, leaders need to be aware of and ready to deal with the inevitability that conflicts will arise among members of teams, especially dispersed teams. If teams can not only learn to effectively resolve conflict but also find ways to turn conflict to their advantage, the diversity of perspectives and ideas among teammates can lead to discovery rather than discord.

As the environment and the economy within which organizations work have become increasingly global, teams have become essential. Information technology, the heightened competition resulting from global markets, and the move toward knowledge-based enterprises have created much flatter organizations. Organizations, in turn, have looked to teams to replace a top-down approach to addressing business challenges and to supplant individual effort with group

strength. Indeed, the reliance on teams and teamwork is perhaps at an all-time high. It's safe to say that most people have served, are serving, or will serve on a team during their work careers.

However, given the expanding diversity of the workforce, the mobility of workers, and the seemingly endless procession of mergers and acquisitions, it's increasingly common for team members to work with others with whom they have abundant differences. These differences contain

by **Tim A. Flanagan and Craig E. Runde**

both the potential for innovation and creativity and the seeds of team disagreements and discord. It's inevitable that the members of a team will experience conflict, but the most effective teams find ways to manage members' differences, leverage their disagreements, avoid polarization, and capitalize on their diversity of perspectives.

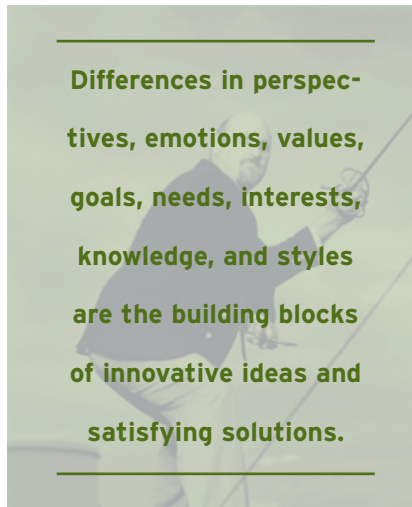
For many teams, conflict exists at the root of some of their best ideas as well as some of their worst failures. Imagine for a moment what the world would be like if people had no differences—if we all looked alike, acted alike, thought alike, and behaved alike. It sounds like one of those grade B horror movies on late-night TV. Without differences, the world would have the same awful plot, minimal action, and worthless dialogue, and life and work would be a bore. The natural differences among us provide definition and identity. Differences in perspectives, emotions, values, goals, needs, interests, knowledge, and styles are the building blocks of innovative ideas and satisfying solutions. Conflict is simply a manifestation of people's differences. The result of conflict can be positive, neutral, or negative. The trick, especially on teams, is to maximize the good arising from conflict while minimizing the bad.

EMBRACING CONFLICT

In our work with organizations, we routinely suggest that teams confront, engage, and embrace conflict. We often end our presentations with a slide inviting participants to "Have a Conflict-Filled Day!" For most teams, conflict is not only inevitable but routine. Avoiding or ignoring conflict simply doesn't work.

Teams and team members can plan for conflict, learn methods to address it, and discover that conflict, when managed effectively, can result in amazingly satisfying outcomes.

When we ask people to share words that come to mind when they think of conflict, they usually use words like *anger*, *frustration*, and *distress*. Less frequently, we hear terms like *opportunity*, *energizing*, and *problem solving*. The vast majority of team members readily concede that they think of conflict as negative.



Asked how they typically deal with conflict, most team members say they prefer to avoid it. Asked further why conflict is so difficult to address, they typically respond with such remarks as, "It is uncomfortable," or, "We never learned how."

Because people so often see conflict as negative, emotionally distressing, and something to be avoided, it's no wonder that conflict is such a challenge for teams. These attitudes can affect how team members address conflict and can influence the kinds of results teams experience when they face conflict.

Research over the past fifteen years has determined that there are two principal types of conflict in organizations. One kind, called *task conflict*, focuses on how to solve the problems caused by differences. It involves open and vigorous debate of issues. Research has found that task

conflict results in heightened creativity and improved decision making. This is the kind of conflict people describe when they use positive words.

A second kind of conflict, which researchers call *relationship conflict* or *affective conflict*, is less about solving problems and more about finding someone to blame. When people use negative words to describe conflict, they are talking about relationship conflict. Because people most commonly use negative terms to describe conflict, this suggests that they are experiencing mainly relationship conflict.

Researchers have determined that relationship conflict leads to poorer productivity in teams. People pull back from one another when this type of conflict emerges. Less communication leads to insufficient vetting of options and consequently to poorer quality decisions. It also results in less buy-in to whatever decision is made, which affects the quality of implementation.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



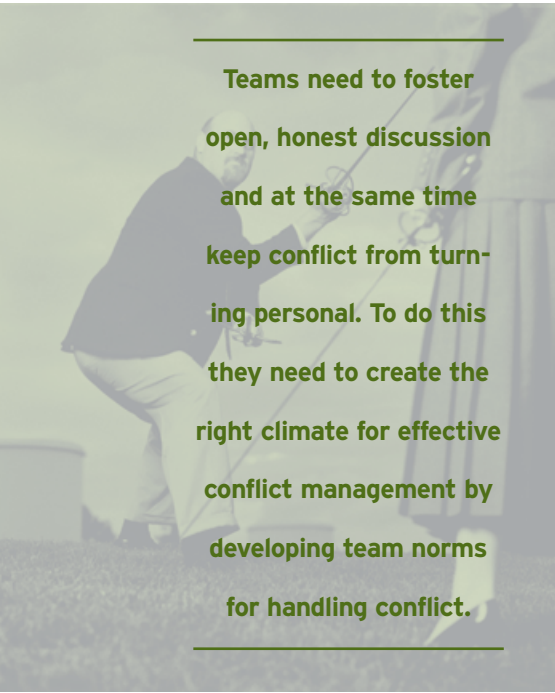
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The obvious suggestion is that teams should try to have more task conflict and less relationship conflict. Although teams may try to do this, their efforts often fall into jeopardy because what starts out as task conflict can easily be transformed into relationship conflict. Criticism of someone's idea can be interpreted as criticism of the person, and this can provoke an angry response and spark relationship conflict.

To benefit from the upside of task conflict and avoid the problems associated with relationship conflict, teams need to foster open, honest discussion and at the same time keep



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OPEN AND HONEST

Conflict competent teams work to develop an environment in which

team members feel comfortable and safe discussing issues openly and honestly. To do this they develop norms describing how they want to address conflict when it emerges, so they can keep the focus on solving problems. Key elements in these norms are fostering *trust and safety*, developing strong *collaboration*, and enhancing *emotional intelligence* within the team.

- *Trust and safety.* When team members do not trust one another or feel safe in the group, they will not be prepared to openly discuss their views for fear that others might hold what they say against them. Trust and safety in teams involves each individual's willingness to make himself or herself vulnerable. To do this each person needs to feel that the other team members have his or her best interests in mind, or at least that they won't take advantage of him or her. Team leaders can foster trust in teams by serving as a model and making themselves vulnerable. They also need to address breaches of trust quickly so that suspicion doesn't grow in the team.

- *Collaboration.* When team members collaborate, they create the right climate for dealing with conflict. When team members work together closely, share information openly, and make decisions collaboratively, their sense of togetherness grows and they are better able to address the differences that arise. Team leaders can encourage collaboration by structuring team activities, decision-making processes, information-sharing opportunities, and reward structures to emphasize interaction.

- *Emotional intelligence.* Conflict is deeply connected to emotions. The emotional intelligence of team members can have a major impact on their ability to deal with conflict. Emotions are also contagious. When some members of a

team begin to feel angry or upset, it is easy for others to pick up on these emotions and begin to feel tense themselves. Team leaders who want to create the right climate for addressing conflict need to stay aware of the emotional temperature in their teams. If they sense that team members are upset about an issue, it is important for them to address the matter and not let it fester.

When teams set the right climate and develop effective norms for addressing conflict, they will be well positioned to use constructive communication techniques to understand the issues associated with a conflict and to develop creative solutions to resolve these issues.

FIGHT OR FLIGHT

To preserve and maintain the right climate, team members must choose to communicate in constructive ways. Unfortunately, when team members are confronted with conflict, they all too often resort to fight-or-flight behaviors. For some the reactions are angry outbursts or sarcastic comments directed at the conflict partner (fight); for others conflict produces avoidance, yielding, or minimizing responses (flight). In either case the destructive nature of the responses reduces the likelihood of engaging in open, robust, and honest discussions of the issues that led to the conflict. The alternative to engaging in destructive responses is to choose differently in the moment. This is challenging, but there are several ways to significantly cool the heat of conflict and improve the chances of finding agreeable solutions.

For many people conflict seems to spiral out of control suddenly. Even when they see it coming, they find it difficult to take corrective or preventive action. A process that involves *cooling down, slowing down, and*

engaging constructively is useful in such cases.

The act of cooling down first requires increasing one's self-awareness. What kinds of situations tend to set you off? What are your personal hot buttons? For instance, does hostility in others raise your emotional temperature to uncontrollable levels? Or when team meetings seem to drag on forever, do you feel your frustrations rising? Identifying and understanding your hot buttons can help you maintain control. When you are more mindful of your reactions to conflict you are better able to recognize your emotions early and *choose* your response. Mindfulness in the moment involves the ability to step back, assess, and view the situation from the outside. This ability to observe the moment enables a more thoughtful response. Instead of snapping back at a perceived hostile comment, you choose a measured response. Instead of rolling your eyes at a teammate during an extra-long meeting, you suggest tabling the topic for future consideration.

A corollary to cooling down is slowing down. In essence, slowing down is accomplished by having a contingency plan for conflict. All team members experience times when they react rather than respond. In the midst of reacting, their ability to think clearly and choose wisely is greatly diminished. For moments such as these, a backup plan comes in handy. Take a brief time-out. When you realize the reactive nature of your behaviors, have a phrase you can use, such as: "I'm sorry. I really want to give this my best thinking and I need a quick time-out to gather my thoughts." Even a brief respite from the conflict situation allows you to slow things down, reflect on your choices, and prepare to engage constructively with your teammates.

The single most powerful tool for engaging conflict constructively is *perspective taking*. When you demon-

strate to your conflict partners that you see their points of view, understand their reasoning, and have empathy for their feelings and regard for their values, amazing progress can be made. Most conflicts become more intense or entrenched when teammates fail to meaningfully acknowledge their differences. Perspective taking, done well, causes your conflict partners to see that you genuinely grasp their interests and feelings. It often leaves them more willing to inquire about your point of view.

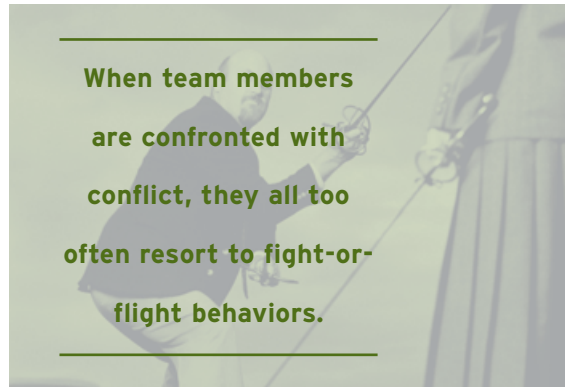
Another suggestion for those in conflict is to approach the disagreement with a sense of wonder and curiosity. Remember when, as a child, you would gaze at the clouds with your friends, looking for shapes that resembled animals, objects, or people? "Look, there's an elephant standing on a hamburger bun!" someone would say. A friend would reply: "Where, where? I see a pig in a mudhole, but I don't see the elephant. Show me!" What if you approached conflicts with teammates, other members of the organization, family members, and friends with the same degree of wonder and curiosity? It can thaw seemingly frozen positions and fuel innovative and expansive possibilities.

Beyond perspective taking, there are several other engagement behaviors and tools that can help in conflict situations. *Listening for understanding* is critical. Instead of listening with the intent to respond or reply, we suggest listening with the intent to hear and learn. *Expressing or disclosing emotions* honestly and openly, rather than acting out those emotions, builds trust and enables deeper dialogue. *Reaching out* to teammates to reengage in a difficult conversation rather than avoiding or ignoring the issue produces an opportunity to move toward resolution. Team members who address conflict by cooling down, slowing down, and

engaging constructively help the team build conflict competence.

SEPARATION ANXIETY

Dispersed teams, sometimes called virtual or global teams, experience many of the same challenges with conflict as traditional teams do. At the same time, team members who are separated by distance, and some-



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times by culture, face additional difficulties when dealing with the inevitable conflicts that arise.

When people are not interacting face to face, conflicts may be harder to recognize. Conflicts in dispersed teams can easily remain hidden and grow unchecked. Consequently, leaders of dispersed teams need to communicate with team members frequently to make sure things are proceeding smoothly. Once leaders suspect that conflict is present, they need to remain even more vigilant so that the conflict doesn't fester and turn destructive.

Even the communication processes in dispersed teams can create conflicts. On the one hand, lag times between sending and receiving messages can make it difficult to develop shared meanings. On the other hand, rapid e-mail responses can quickly escalate tensions in ways that would not happen in face-to-face meetings. Also, the scheduling of

conference calls can create resentments if one group always has to participate at inconvenient times because of time zone differences.

When members of dispersed teams come from different cultures, they can have difficulty understanding one another. This can lead to misunderstandings that can grow into difficult conflict if not addressed early.

Different cultures have different views about how conflicts should be

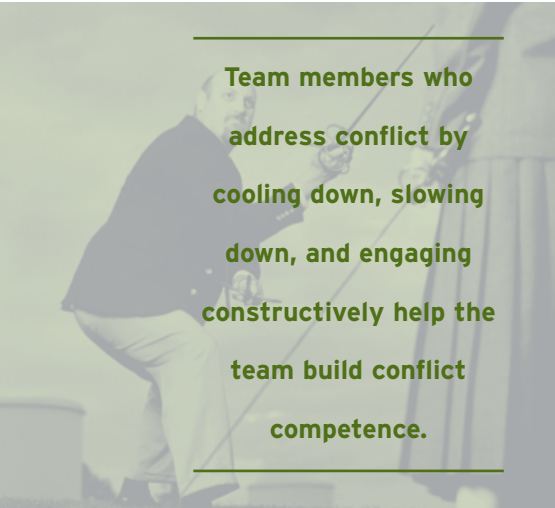
conflict effectively in dispersed teams whose members come from different cultures.

Leaders of dispersed teams should bring their team members together for a face-to-face meeting at the team's inception. This helps team members get to know one another, build trust, better understand one another's contexts, and develop norms for how they want to deal with conflict and how they want to use communication technologies in order to be effective.

way that identifying personal hot buttons is useful for individuals. Teams that have been together for a while might consider also discussing how they have handled past conflict on the team. Many teams routinely conduct project reviews—why not conduct conflict reviews?

More involved methods for discussing team conflict processes and readiness include assessments of the team climate. Trust and safety are essential elements of the right climate. Dialogue regarding attitudes toward conflict is also useful. The emotional intelligence of team members can be explored. In-depth analyses in these areas can lead to specific team agreements about behaviors and processes before, during, and after conflict. Such agreements enable teams and team members not only to handle disagreements with less pain but also to embrace and use conflict, rather than avoid it and miss opportunities.

Teams must learn effective ways to resolve conflicts that naturally arise. But the true payoff for conflict competent teams is realizing the potential of conflict. The diversity of perspectives and ideas among teammates can lead to discovery rather than discord. Conflict can be a signal that much more than what is currently obvious exists in the perceptions and views of one's conflict partners. Addressed competently, conflict becomes an advantage as the issue at hand is examined, expanded, and embraced. ✍



Team members who address conflict by cooling down, slowing down, and engaging constructively help the team build conflict competence.

addressed. Some cultures prefer to discuss issues head-on, whereas others prefer indirect approaches. Some believe it is important to express emotions openly, whereas others prefer to be reserved about emotions. Understanding these different approaches is important for managing

BEING PREPARED

Most teams that struggle with conflict have not spent enough time discussing process issues and agreeing on standards and methods for addressing conflict before it happens. Conflict is not easy. Discussing conflict, even when the team members are not actively engaged in conflict, doesn't come naturally. But because conflict on teams is inevitable, it makes sense to prepare for it.

Many teams invest time in creating their mission, vision, and team agreements. Teams should invest similar effort in agreeing on processes for handling conflict. This effort can begin with a simple discussion of how team members usually handle conflict. Open sharing of members' perspectives helps to prepare them for the real conflicts that will occur. Identifying hot topics in advance can be helpful to the team in the same

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