CONSTRUCTIVE CONFLICT IN TEAMWORK

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Abstract:

Conflict is a necessary part of teamwork. Without it, team synergy and creativity cannot be maximized. In fact, there would be no advantage to working together at all. Conflict can have both positive and negative outcomes. Negative outcomes from conflict that has not been properly managed can be very disruptive to teaming activities and possibly quite devastating to individual team members. The three most important principles behind the realization of the benefits of conflict are open communication, the respect of differences and involvement by all team members affected.

Conflict expression is one of the most important and powerful tools for effective and productive teamwork. The reasons for encouraging conflict are many. During conflict expression critical thinking is stimulated, innovation and creativity are sparked, group stagnation is minimized and healthy debate and discussion is energizing. How well conflict is managed will determine whether the positive or negative results are achieved. The key is to create an environment where diversity is viewed as an opportunity, rather than a threat. Learning to manage conflict effectively will enable teams to take advantage of the team's diversity while still working together towards common organizational and personal goals.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In order to manage conflict, it is first important to understand what it is. What comes to mind when one says the word conflict? Most of the thoughts that come

to mind are negative and that is a typical reaction. There are many different definitions of conflict. The word in its simplest form means difference. Conflicts, or differences, are not good or bad. Depending how they are handled, conflicts can produce constructive behavior and positive outcomes or destructive behavior and negative outcomes.

According to Alden and Blankenburg (1995, 5-2) there are two fundamental bases of conflict. The first is information. One person has information that another doesn't have, or two individuals have completely different sets of information. The second is perception. People simply see things differently based on their unique paradigms and mental filters.

Differences in information and perception create conflict in four basic categories: facts, methods, goals and values (Alden & Blankenburg; 1995, 5-2). People have access to a different set of facts or they see the same facts from distinctly different viewpoints. Probably no two individuals will do the same thing in exactly the same manner. Goals the people work toward can often be quite different, even in the same environment. Based on unique backgrounds and experiences people differ in their basic value systems. Differences in four categories can be attributed to individual personalities, attitudes, and expectations as varied and as common as people themselves. Jelled teams learn how to deal with such concerns through frank and open communication. They do not avoid, repress, or deny conflict, but rather see to it as an opportunity. Only when the whole team views conflict in this light can they put aside their combative tact and take a creative stance. The team members no longer feel threatened, they feel challenged.

Conflict is natural and, therefore, inevitable. We don't often see a group of individuals integrate their unique experiences, perspectives, values, and expectations into a common purpose, set of performance goals, and approach without encountering significant conflict. The most challenging risk associated with conflict relate to making it constructive for the team instead of simply enduring it. Unmanaged conflict can lead to less- than-adequate performance, resentments, and lack of motivation. When differences surface, the must be addressed in a healthy way in order to take advantage of their benefits and the synergistic effect of teamwork.

2. CONSTRUCTIVE CONFLICT BEHAVIOR

Although conflict is most often thought of as negative, changes in organizations would never occur without it. Conflict can have a positive impact on all teams if

it is viewed as a potential change agent. Only when someone opens up a conflict and when, at the same time, one or more other people respond constructively, can individual differences and concerns be discussed and molded into common goals. Only then does the team give itself the chance to move ahead.

Conflict expression is one of the most important and powerful tools for effective and productive teamwork. The reasons for encouraging it are many. The most valuable ones are listed below (Kayser; 1990, 146-147):

- Critical thinking is stimulated – When an individual challenges the direction of the team or takes exceptions to an offered proposal, the team is re-examine its own beliefs in some detail and to reconsider previously ignored aspects of the issue.

- Innovation and creativity are sparked – When people are in conflict over acceptable alternatives, the diversity can motivate the team members to work out new and creative alternatives that can be supported by everyone.

- Group stagnation is minimized – Contrary opinions and ideas among team members increase the breadth and depth of each member's understanding of the subject and of each other.

- Healthy debate and discussion is energized – The excitement and energy that springs from interpersonal differences can increase the motivation and involvement of team members in tackling the task or issue at hand.

This doesn't mean any of this is easy to manage. It requires hard work and time, and is not void of barriers and their associated risks.

3. OBSTACLES TO CONSTRUCTIVE CONFLICT BEHAVIOR

Most people have learned to speak carefully and within accepted boundaries. The conditioned response emphasizes impressing and respecting your leaders, not letting your peers see your weaknesses, supporting the party line to avoid appearing disloyal or rebellious, and offering main line ideas without advancing wild ideas. These behaviors make constructive conflict difficult and risky.

Certain cultural backgrounds and certain personal behavior styles are not conductive to the expression of differences. It may be considered inappropriate, it may be uncomfortable, or the necessary skills may have never been learned and developed.

Fear is probably number one barrier to constructive conflict behavior. Our fears may have been bred in our cultural upbringing or socialization, or they may simply be inherent. We fear hurting other people's feelings, we fear getting our own feelings hurt, we fear something unpleasant will happen, or, at the very best, we fear the unknown. Since most of us have had negative experience in the past and have had limited training in how to use constructive conflict, the risk is often viewed as too great.

4. THE REASONS OF CONFLICT BEHAVIOR

The fears mentioned are not unfounded. If mishandled, conflicts can be very destructive. They can produce animosities, hurt feelings, misunderstandings, and disappointments.

Disagreements and differences are destructive when they paralyze the team's ability to realize its desires outcomes. This can happen for the following reasons (Kayser; 1990, 147-148):

- *Winners are produced at the expense of losers* – People's energies are directed toward each other in an atmosphere of total victory versus total defeat. Implementation of the winning decision is a constant struggle because of the active or passive resistance that the looser demonstrate.

- *Polarization is fostered* – In a destructive mode, diversity does not produce faithful interactions. Instead, opposing opinions cause members to defend their ideas rather that modify them. Getting *my own way* becomes more important than discovering the best solution for the team's current dilemma.

- *Energy is consumed unproductively* – Preparing for battle takes time and effort. The team's energy is drained by the internal *we-they* fight rather that harnessed in a cooperative undertaking of *us* against the problem. Excessive time is consumed and relevant information does not get shared.

- *A short-term orientation takes hold* – At the destructive level, team members become conflict-focused by stressing the here-and-now differences as opposed to being relationship-focused but accepting the long-term consequences and potential benefits of their differences.

- *Unpleasant emotional encounters are experienced* – Dysfunctional personal interactions can create stress and poor working relationships among the team members. Chances of taking risks are even smaller for future interactions.

The ability to manage conflict will determine whether the team will achieve positive or negative results. The most important is to create an environment where differences in opinions, values and beliefs are viewed as an opportunity and not a threat.

5. CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STYLES

Learning to manage conflict effectively will enable teams to take advantage of the team's diversity while still working towards common organizational and personal goals (Alden & Blankenburg; 1995, 5-5, 5-6). In order to manage conflict effectively, it is crucial to know and understand how each individual reacts to conflict.

One of the most useful models of conflict management was designed by Thomas and Kilmann in 1974. They separate two dimensions of conflict-handling behavior: cooperativeness – the attempt to satisfy the other party's needs and assertiveness – the attempt to satisfy one's own needs. These two dimensions define five styles of dealing with conflict (Pfeiffer; 1991, 215):

- **Avoidance** reflects a desire to evade the matter at hand. The individual who uses this style neglects his own needs as well as those of other party by not raising or addressing the conflict issue. This approach is neither assertive nor cooperative.

- **Accommodation** indicates a willingness to meet the needs of the other people involved at the expense of the one's own needs. Cooperation is the primary behavior manifested with this style. Unlike the competitor and the collaborator, the individual who accommodates does not behave assertively.

- **Competition** indicates a desire to meet one's own needs and the lack of concern for the needs of others involved in the conflict. In employing this style, the competitor uses some form of power, which may be connected with their position, rank, expertise, or ability to persuade.

- **Compromise** reflects a desire to find a solution that will partially meet the needs of everyone involved. The individual who approaches conflict with compromise in mind expects the outcome to be mutually acceptable and

somewhat satisfying to all of the parties. They also expect to give up something in order to achieve a solution that everyone can live with. This style is both assertive and cooperative, but to a lesser degree than is collaboration.

- **Collaboration** reflects a desire to meet the needs of all people involved in the conflict. The collaborator is highly assertive, as is the competitor, however, unlike the competitor, the collaborator cooperates with everyone involved so that all needs are acknowledged as important, alternative solutions and their consequences are identified, and the alternative that meets person's needs is chosen and implemented.

Among these styles there are no better or worse ones, but each style of conflict management is useful in certain situations. Most people have the tendency to use one or two of these styles, but everyone can learn how to use all five of them. The ability to choose the appropriate style in a certain conflict situation will help increase the chances of the positive outcome of the conflict.

6. CONSTRUCTIVE CONFLICT IN TEAMWORK

There are two aspects in managing conflict in teamwork. One is to choose the appropriate conflict management style to obtain the desired positive outcomes. The other is to repair the damage caused from negative outcomes by using appropriate communication skills. Both of these require a cooperative mindset, as well as a set of interpersonal tools (Alden & Blankenburg; 1995, 5-10).

In order to encourage each team member to actively participate in team's session it is important to create an environment where each team member feels that his/her thoughts, opinions, ideas, and proposals are needed by the team and where everyone feels comfortable in putting viewpoints to the table. Feeling comfortable is not a result of participating in agreeable, superficial, flattering, frictionless meetings that lean toward group-think. Rather, it is a result of knowing one's ideas and opinions will be given a fair hearing, above all, knowing that the *issues* will be challenged, not the *people* (Alden & Blankenburg; 1995, 5-10).

It is a great challenge for all team members to resolve difficult problems that can occur in a team. Resolving such problems require constructive criticism among members, disagreement and in-depth exploration of the pros and cons. Losing any one person's contribution can be unproductive for everyone. Buy being patient and using facilitating behaviors and effective communication skills, the team can solicit

information and opinions from all team members. The more mature the team becomes in sharing the responsibility for earnestly seeking out what other team members have to say, the more the chances of missing valuable and key contributions will be reduced. (Alden & Blankenburg; 1995, 5-10)

7. MANAGING DESTRUCTIVE CONFLICT BEHAVIORS

Destructive conflict behaviors can be harmful and disruptive for the team. Such behaviors are minimized if the group spends enough time and effort in developing itself as a team: developing a common mission, getting to know each other, establishing norms, practicing facilitating behavior and using constructive conflict management techniques. Very often a group of people blame an individual for causing a certain problem. According to Sholters (1992, 6-36 – 6-45) there is a list of more common disruptive behaviors in teamwork:

- **Floundering** – The team is unclear or overwhelmed by its task. Members wonder what actions to take.

- **Overbearing participants** – They seem to hold on to a disproportionate amount of influence to the team, often because of their authority or expertise.

- **Dominating participants** – They talk too much, the like to hear themselves talk and they rarely give others a chance to contribute.

- **Reluctant participants** – they feel shy or unsure of themselves in the team, rarely speak and must be encouraged to contribute.

- **Unquestioned acceptance of opinions as facts** – Some team members express personal beliefs and assumptions with such confidence that listeners assume they are hearing a presentation of facts.

- **Rush of accomplishment** – This is common to teams being pushed by one or more members who are impatient for results and unwilling to work through the necessary steps of the systematic approach.

- **Attribution** – This is a tendency to assume what people's motives are when we disagree with or don't understand their opinion or behavior.

- **Discount and "plops"** – Everyone has certain values or perspectives that are important to them. Discounting is ignoring or ridiculing those values and perspectives. A plop is when no one acknowledges a statement made by a

team member, and the discussion picks up on a subject totally irrelevant to the statement.

- **Wanderlust: digression and tangents** – Team members lose track of the meeting's purpose or want to avoid a sensitive topic. Discussions than wander off from the subject.

- **Feuding team members** – Sometimes a team becomes a battlefield for members who are at odds with each other. Usually, the problem is not the subject they are arguing about rather the contest itself. Other team members may get swept up in the battle or feel like spectators at the sporting mach.

Some of these behaviors are not as disruptive as others. Some are just fleeting disruptions that come as a needed break. However, some are chronic, very disruptive and occurring over and over again. The team should recognize the seriousness of the disruptive behavior and reach accordingly.

Sholters (1992, 6-33 – 6-35) believes there are five strategies for confronting disruptive behavior, each with an increased level of intervention:

1. **Do nothing (non-intervention)** – ignore the offensive behavior, particularly if it is not a chronic problem or doesn't seem to inhibit the team.

2. **Off –line conversation (minimal intervention)** – talk to the disruptive member outside the team session, asking them what would increase their satisfaction with the team. Give constructive feedback.

3. **Impersonal group time** – at the start of the meeting, talk about general team process concerns without pointing out individuals. Include the disruptive behavior to the list.

4. **Off-line confrontation (medium intervention)** – off-line confrontation is the same as off-line conversation except whoever does it is more assertive. It is used when other attempts have failed.

5. **In-group confrontation (high intervention)** – as a last resort, after other approaches have failed, the leader may deal with the offending behavior in the presence of the team. This disrupts the team's other business and exposes an individual's behavior to open critique in the team. This tactic can be effective, but it can also be a disaster. The team must prepare carefully on how to word

the confrontation, what reactions to anticipate, how to avoid defensiveness or hostilities in the offending member.

Expulsion from the team is not recommended because it can create a stigma that remains with the team and the expelled member for a long time.

8. CONCLUSION

Anyone who participates in a team will be dealing with diversity. If all member's approaches, opinions, values and perspectives were the same, there would be little need for team decisions at all. The very idea of teamwork assumes that there will be different ideas and proposals for solving a common problem, reaching a goal, or making a decision.

Getting the most of the team requires all team members to understand that conflict is neither good nor bad. The challenge is to encourage diversity without encouraging interpersonal tension, to take the constructive power of differences without igniting their destructive power.

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