



## Team Conflict



Conflict is common among Teams and it can be a source of innovation, creativity and *angst*. As a team leader and member we each have responsibility to positively engage in conflict. And 2 key steps in positively engaging in conflict is to first, recognize and accept the benefits of conflict managed well, and then, secondly, to apply good conflict management skills to a conflict situation. When considering and assessing conflict, start with identifying whether the conflict is about personalities (affective) or cognitive in nature, i.e., is it about an issue of the goal or the way to approach the conflict situation.

First, ascertain if the situation is fueled with antagonism toward team members and/or individuals (affective). Affective conflict is rarely beneficial. If the situation is affective, your solution path sends you down the need to create ground rules, mediate between individuals or escalate the situation to someone who can assist. My first rule of thumb is to encourage teams to solve the conflict themselves. Not always easy! (See my previous newsletters to find ways to assess and prepare for resolving a conflict situation between individuals). Next, if the persons involved can't find a remedy, is there a leader, a mutually trusted coworker, or can Human Resources help? Involving a leader and HR should be mutually agreed to with all participants as involving others can be tricky without that agreement. I had many employees come to me when an issue wasn't addressed with co-workers directly. And I almost always heard from the other parties that not getting that direct feedback hurt, rather than helped the situation. There are a couple of caveats though - when there is harm or the potential for harm involved in the team or when the conflict is caused by disparate treatment or instances of bias, and finally when the team doesn't have the skill or the will to solve the situation on their own. This same caveat relates to conflict between individuals.

Cognitive conflict can routinely be beneficial, when addressed well. When the conflict situation is cognitive, members can discuss the differencing values, preferences, methods and/or goals to solve the issue. Here are common issues that cause conflict within teams, including: *work styles, personality differences, task based preferences, conflicting leadership direction, competing roles and responsibilities, varying values and lack of resources*. Again, identifying the source of the conflict leads you to the path of resolution.

I encourage team members to consider the **work styles and personalities** of the people involved – are they directive vs. supportive? Are they extroverted or introverted, do they like information that is intuitive vs. those things that they can feel, see, hear, and smell? Once they have the information, do the participants make fact-based or value based decisions? And finally, are they linear thinkers vs. or those who need to think about all the possibilities? When your conflict is about the way to **accomplish a task**, use tools like brainstorming and plus and minus lists. When the conflict is due to **leadership direction**, stop and ask for more information. In situations of **competing roles and responsibilities**, list them and identify ways to share and divvy up the work. And in those cases with a **lack of resources**, can the issue be delegated to others that have resources, be denied or delayed?

Conflict can be difficult with conflict avoiders. With reflection on times when a conflict yielded benefits, such as innovation and creative solutions and when using tools and training on conflict principles, we can proactively address conflict as one way to become a high performing team.

