

Conflict Management

In a controversy the instant we feel anger we have already ceased striving for the truth, and have begun striving for ourselves.

~ The Buddha ~

The ability to deal with conflict effectively is directly related to overall management success and is just one aspect of relationship management¹. Too little conflict can indicate a stagnant organisation or disinterested or demoralised project team, whereas too much conflict indicates a dysfunctional team.

Vijay Verma in *Managing the Project Team* refers to three views of conflict:

- The traditional view that conflict is bad and must be eliminated through the use of authority. This is not a good view for project teams and projects.
- The interactionist view is that conflict is desirable and necessary for high performance teams. Conflict should be encouraged. This is NOT the *PMBOK® Guide* view and has limited general acceptance.
- The contemporary view is that conflict is inevitable, it may be positive and it may be negative but it must be managed to be beneficial. Conflict can be a sign that the project team is committed. (This is the *PMBOK® Guide* view)

In any conflict situation, you can choose to apply one of the following basic approaches with the noted likely outcome on achieving your goals and maintaining the relationship:

| Method | Achieving goals? | Maintain relationships? |
|--|------------------|-------------------------|
| Forcing: ‘do it’ Requires the use of your power or authority | High | Very low |
| Smoothing: Emphasizes agreement, minimises disputes | Low | High |
| Compromise: Both sides give something up | Medium | Medium |
| Problem solving: also referred to as ‘confronting’ Joint approach to the problem in order to find a mutually acceptable solution (Win-Win ²) | High | High |
| Withdrawal: You withdraw from the argument ³ | Very low | Low |

Regardless of the method chosen, the resolution requires some level of negotiation if you plan to achieve a sensible outcome⁴. Conflicts are events within a larger process. They are parts of a system in which any action anywhere can affect the system everywhere. Doing something that may give a short term gain, without thinking of the long term results is dangerous. You need to develop a solution that will avoid hostility or result in active resistance, lack of motivation, or opposition.

¹ For more on managing contractual disputes see: http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1049_Dispute_Management.pdf

² For more on Win-win see: http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1032_Win-Win_Negotiating.pdf

³ This may be a tactical withdrawal to select a better time for the ‘fight’, or simply a decision to ‘pick your battles’.

⁴ For more on negotiating see: http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1024_Negotiating.pdf

There is always more to any conflict than the left brained components like time, money and product quality; the right brain components of feelings, pride, trust, etc. must also be considered to find the optimal resolution⁵. An optimal resolution is the one that leads to an outcome that meets as many of the parties' acceptance criteria as possible and results in a stronger relationship among the parties. The stronger relationship is important because it will help reduce the volume of conflicts going forward, ease of resolving those conflicts that do arise and improve the quality of the resolutions.

Within this framework, **problem solving**⁶ is the ideal option focused on a Win-Win⁷ outcome. However, being a practical realist you need to accept the fact that there are circumstances where win-win solutions are not possible. Win-win needs the conflict to exist in a relationship that has the following core values:

- Mutual benefit & Non-harming
- Trust
- Honesty
- Respect
- Optimal resolutions
- Non-attachment.

When these values are not present the probability of a Win-Win outcome is low and if the relationship cannot be enhanced to develop these characteristics other options may need to be considered but only as a last resort. Conflict management built around 'forcing', that values winning at all cost, devalues harmonious relationships and the long term benefits of a forced outcome are typically less effective than those that are based on confronting problems collaboratively. Resolving conflicts by forcing a solution on the other party risks failure, not only in the current situation but into the future and always leaves a dissatisfied opponent who is going to be around for the long term.

Non-attachment in conflict management

Attachment is neither good nor bad. There is constructive attachment and destructive attachment. In psychology, attachment is the capacity to form and maintain healthy emotional relationships. It is a foundation for healthy living throughout life. This kind of attachment is clearly a good thing. Its absence in childhood leads to serious problems. In more general usage, attachment is binding to something, for example, a loved one or an idea.

In Buddhist thinking attachment is seen as the cause of suffering. It can be attachment to the idea of wanting things to be different than the way they can be. It can be attachment to the way things are. We are attached when we must have what we like or avoid things we don't like, no matter what.

Note that the wanting or desire is not the issue. The issue is the attachment or the idea that things must be as we want them. Attachment allows wanting to get in the way of skilful thinking and action. By adopting a position of non-attachment towards ideas and positions you are free to work towards a mutually beneficial outcome. Attachment is also linked to stress.

⁵ For more on Emotional Intelligence see:
http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1008_Emotional%20Intellegence.pdf

⁶ Problem solving techniques are discussed in WP1013, see:
http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1013_Problem_Solving.pdf

⁷ For more on Win-Win negotiating see:
http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1032_Win-Win_Negotiating.pdf

Stress in conflict management

Stress may be good or bad depending on the situation. What is important is to be aware of the stress as it arises. You need to sense your thoughts and feeling before they burst into behaviour.

Watch for the signs of stress, for example unpleasant thoughts and feelings, perhaps a tightening of the chest or stomach, maybe a shortness of breath; anger; fear. If you miss these, watch for the behavioural signs - you've raised your voice, banged your fist on the table, become sarcastic or uncharacteristically silent.

Recognize that all stress is, is a barometer to let you know how you feel about something. It is the result of your attachment to an idea. Ask yourself, "What idea do I have that is causing this stress?" Asking only requires a short moment. Doing so immediately creates some "space" around the feelings. The act of asking immediately creates the opportunity to stand back and take a more mindful versus reactive approach.

Ideas for a 'mindful' approach to conflict management

- Give yourself a cooling off period. Don't approach a difficult person when you're angry.
- Don't take the 'hook' when people try to bring you into a conversation that you don't want to have or aren't ready to address. Simply say, "This isn't a good time to talk about that." Or, "We've gone over that before. You know my stand."
- Put your ego aside. Listen first⁸. Often people just want to know someone has considered their point of view. You lose nothing but a few minutes by listening to what someone has to say.
- 'Own' your language. Instead of saying "You really screwed this up." Try, "I see some ways to improve this."
- Immediately work to find common ground. What can you agree about? Once you articulate that, you will better be able to address the areas of contention.
- Define how you'd both be better served by reaching agreement.
- Keep the conversation on track. Don't allow the other person to throw in the kitchen sink from left field. Simply say, "We're getting into another area. Let's get back to the original question."
- Deal with facts and observations, not inferences and judgments. Arguing about facts is difficult, however.
- Don't worry about "why" they behave the way they do. It really isn't important. Instead, focus on how you can work with this person.

The Triangle of Truth

Resolving a conflict has never been an easy task — whether you're dealing with your boss, your colleagues, or family members. Veteran journalist, corporate coach, consultant and speaker Lisa Earle McLeod recommends an alternative in her new book *The Triangle of Truth The Surprisingly Simple Secret to Resolving Conflicts Large and Small* (Perigee; January 2010). 'Instead of trying to compromise in the middle, or the more common scenario, fight about who's right and who's wrong,' writes McLeod, 'the Triangle of Truth provides a model for redirecting your energy. It points you toward a solution at the top of the triangle that honours the truth on both sides.'

The seven principles that make up the Triangle are:

- **Principle 1: Embrace 'And'** – Using the Triangle successfully means eliminating either/or thinking. By harnessing the power of 'and', we enable ourselves to consider ideas different from our own, leading to solutions that either/or thinkers would have missed.

⁸ For more on Active Listening see: http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1012_Active_Listening.pdf

- **Principle 2: Make Peace With Ambiguity** – Fear dates back to our prehistoric ancestors and our primal instinct to survive, and whether the source of our fear is real or imagined, fear holds us in the either/or mindset. Our brain locks on to what we believe to be true, and, as a result, we expend every ounce of energy defending it. This, of course, prohibits us from hearing any other idea or side to the argument, making it impossible to implement the Triangle of Truth.
- **Principle 3: Hold Space For Other Perspectives** – In order to achieve your objectives, you must consider the objectives of others. While it's easy to become consumed by our own ambitious goals, ignoring the goals that are driving someone else prohibits you from working as a team to get what you both want.
- **Principle 4: Seek Higher Ground** – Seeking higher ground requires us to look beyond the conflict or issue at hand to see the bigger picture, considering the full context of the situation. It involves elevating our minds above the thinking that there are only two choices, either A or B, and allows us to create a different choice — one that helps us achieve what we really want.
- **Principle 5: Discern Intent** – Solutions are based on what someone believes is the best way to solve a problem. Whether or not you agree with their solution, it's critical that you try to understand their intent. Chances are their solution wasn't derived from any intent to ruin you, the project or the company.
- **Principle 6: Elevate Others** – Helping others elevate their thinking by going beyond the narrow “what” and “when” questions to the more expansive “how” and “why” questions allows us to all think more deeply. By elevating our thinking, we are able to think more creatively, assimilate multiple ideas, uncover the core truths behind proposed solutions and, naturally, solve conflicts more effectively and without the drama.
- **Principle 7: Be The Peace** – Go beyond being a peacekeeper and instead being a peacemaker. Rather than simply keeping the conflict under wraps, we must learn how to embrace other ideas and assimilate our conflicting ideas into a solution that far surpasses either idea.

Receiving Feedback

Giving and receiving feedback is essential for continuous improvement but can also be a prime source of conflict. When receiving feedback, non-attachment is essential for you to engage effectively in the conversation and maximise the benefits to your performance. However, sometimes the person providing feedback does not have the skills needed to develop and deliver constructive input. In these instances, you must be able to employ both effective listening and active listening skills⁹ to achieve a professional outcome. The key things to remember for optimal results are:

1. Acknowledge the facts.
2. Stay calm and focus on listening. (Avoid arguing and/or being defensive.)
3. Offer opinions only when asked.
4. Take time to absorb the message before you react.
(If a question is posed, ask whether it is OK to answer it later so you have time to process.)
5. Make sure you understand the message before evaluating it.
6. Be attentive to the other person's point of view.
7. Say “thank you.”

⁹ For more on Active listening see: http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1012_Active_Listening.pdf