Managing Conflict in Team Meetings

By Amy Tan Bee Choo and Dr Uwe H Kaufmann

In the course of meetings, be it Six Sigma project team meetings or management meetings, **conflict** is inevitable; it is cited as one of the main reasons people dislike working in teams. Team players should find a way to manage conflict since teamwork is a key to success. Team leaders must understand that when two or more people meet, the stage is set for a potential conflict. As such, preparation is essential. Problems can be solved if these are anticipated. If a problem does happen, the result may be positive or negative depending on our approach.

Conflict can be a healthy sign on a team. It shows communication exists. When a team manages conflict well, it can be a powerful operating tool for the team. It can encourage opinions, debate, discussions; stimulate the group to greater creativity; increase cross-fertilization; generate new ideas; test team members' opinions and beliefs; stretch their imagination leading to a wider variety of alternatives and better results, and give a second wind to your activity.

But when the conflict is mismanaged and goes too far, communication stops. It becomes unhealthy and could be disastrous to the team. It disrupts the team and prevents team-mates from progressing. It creates animosity, jealously and bitterness among team members. When conflict is approached on a win-lose basis, trust is broken and team spirit is at its lowest level. The damage is usually difficult – and sometimes impossible – to repair.

Even when conflict is mismanaged, it may be better than a complete absence of conflict. Why? Absence of conflict could be a sign of apathy or domination by the leader or of too comfortable a situation.

Conflict is a dedicated balance.

You do not remove difference and conflicts –
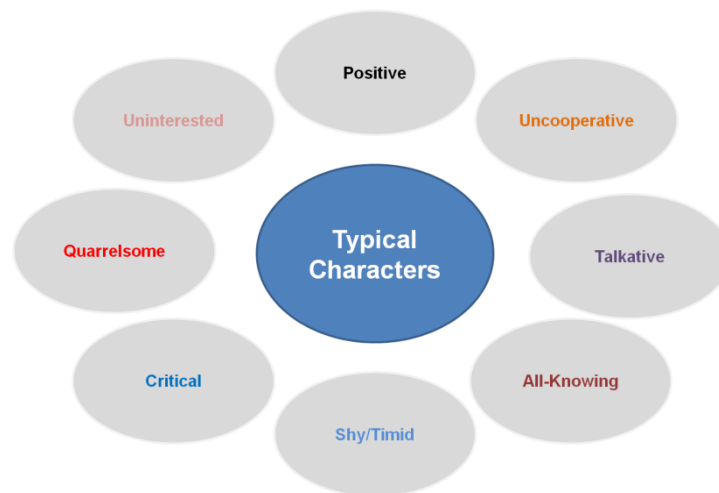
Just keep them in control.

Sources of Team Conflicts

The following are some possible sources of conflict. The detail of each conflict is illustrated based on situations.

- ❑ Interpersonal conflicts
- ❑ Conflict of interest, objectives
- ❑ Conflict of perception
- ❑ Conflict in the decision-making process and methodology
- ❑ Defensiveness
- ❑ Opinions versus facts

Typical Situations

Scenario 1: Interpersonal Conflict

Manager X proposes change in the system affecting several departments. Another manager refuses the idea immediately because he thinks that Manager X's ideas are often not effective. He also had a personal dispute with him some years ago that he cannot forget.

Scenario 2: Conflict in the Decision-Making Process and Methodology

Two engineers want to solve a complex technical problem using two different approaches (software/hardware) and different tools (statistical tool….gut feeling)

Scenario 3: Conflict of Interest

An Area Sales Manager wants to have a local inventory of products to better serve his key customers. The Manufacturing Manager wants to limit as much as possible the inventory to decrease overall storage cost.

Scenario 4: Conflict of Perception – Misunderstanding

A Production Manager wants to modify the Quality Control flow considering the increase in production and estimating that some steps in the control are not useful for quality of the

product. The Quality Manager wants to maintain the flow "perceiving" a change as a huge mistake but mainly as an attack against his authority.

Scenario 5: Defensiveness

Manager X confronts Manager Y regarding a design and asks for information from the later. Manager Y denies any detailed knowledge of the designs and avoids meeting with Manager X. Manager Y fears that Manager X wants to highlight an existing design error for which he is responsible for by uncovering more information.

### Scenario 6: Opinions versus Facts

A team member is arguing to impose his technical solution to improve productivity but has no factual evidence or theory to support his speech. Therefore he is first criticized, then he becomes nervous, and tense and conflict develops; meeting is ineffective.

In many of these situations, everyone means well and tries to accomplish what they perceive to be the best. In any of the cases, conflict is present because of:

- **Unwillingness to work through collaboration**, comprise (INTERPERSONAL)
  Team members attend meetings with pre-conceived ideas and are feeling negative or antagonistic about the subject and the person concerned.

- **Differences in needs, objectives and values** (DECISION-MAKING PROCESS AND METHODOLOGY)
  Major or minor disagreements over goals occur about certain aspects of the job. Opposing teams express their views and fight hard for their positions & ideas without attacking personalities and questioning competencies or integrity of the other team members.

- **Differences in expectations** and lack of communication (INTEREST)
  Team members could not agree to do something if it causes unfavourable results to any one of them.

- **Differences in Perception** – MISUNDERSTANDING
  This type of conflict arises when one of the team members is believed to be uncooperative by not fulfilling his share of responsibilities. Once other members find out that they are doing a task meant for this person, conflict develops. It may also happen that a member may have misunderstood or misinterpreted another member for what the latter has said or done. If this is not clarified or confirmed, this may also lead to conflict.

- **Defensiveness**
  Defensiveness occurs when a team member feels that he is indirectly or will be blamed for a problem; he is not important to the team; and other members manipulate him into doing something for their own benefits. He becomes evasive, shy and uncooperative, denies any involvement, avoids any further confrontation or meeting, and tries to protect himself from further questioning.

- **Opinions versus Facts**
  This kind of conflict occurs when members are putting only opinions forward. In this case, the team member has no concrete elements to show. He feels vulnerable but still persists. This source of conflict is very frequent and has to be managed in refocusing people on one of the team ground rules = always refer to the facts (fact-based decision-making principle)

Behavioural Styles in Conflict Situations

There are **5 alternatives behavioural styles in conflict situations** that you can adopt in any given case. As there is no one method of dealing with conflict and no similar situation or personalities at any given time, the style you adopt to handle conflict should vary. Alternative means should be determined to understand what course of action can be taken to better respond to the issue at hand.
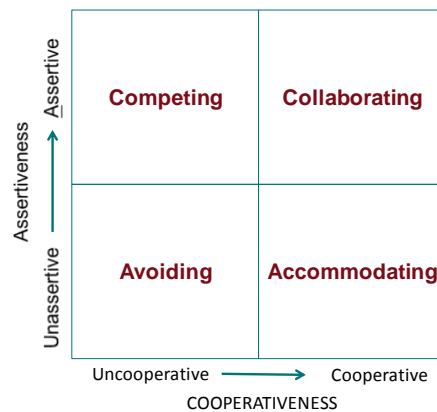
Avoiding   Unassertive and Uncooperative – with this approach, the person does not address the problem. He diplomatically sidesteps an issue, postpones it to a later time or just simply refuses to acknowledge it.

Accommodating Unassertive and Cooperative – opposite of competing. This style tries to please the other person so as not to antagonise him. It is more important to retain the relationship than to get into petty issues through conflict.

Compromising Intermediate in both Assertiveness and Cooperativeness – The objective is to split the difference by bargaining. Both parties will try to reach a mutually-acceptable agreement or solution which can partially satisfy them.

Competing   Assertive and Uncooperative – A power-oriented style where the source of power comes from one's authority or position (including referral to "the system", rank, higher supervision, etc) this can be derived from "standing-up for your rights", trying to defend one's position or belief or just formed wish to win. However, the power or competing strategy results in winners and losers. In the end, the losers may not support any decision that will be made.

Collaborating Assertive and Cooperative (win-win solution) – Opposite of avoiding. Collaborating requires that all parties involved work together to solve a problem at hand instead of defending particular positions. It means trying to get to the bottom of a problem, to understand the root cause, and from there to work on a solution.

It is important to understand the advantages and disadvantages of the different behavioural styles of conflict management as it can help the team leaders or members to be more effective in handling conflict during team meetings.

Managing Conflict

Remember that conflict itself is not bad. When used constructively, it is an effective way for teams to come up with the best decisions. Below are some guidelines to follow to improve conflict management within your team.

First of all, everyone must be aware of the team ground rules and is required to adhere and follow them.

Team Ground Rules

1. establish objectives and re-visit them as often as needed
2. clarify others' point of view to avoid misunderstanding
3. avoid an accusative climate that may put team members on the defensive
4. avoid personal interest
5. use structured problem-solving and decision-making tools
6. opinions are easily debatable only when they are supported by facts and evidence. If not, it leads to endless discussions and no concrete improvements
7. maintain a climate of trust, honesty and openness
8. allow adequate time in settling issues/problems
9. if consensus is not possible or conflict is escalating, move to a related or other issue and return to the original issue at a later time. then, consider the next most acceptable alternatives and work towards a compromise if full agreement is really not possible
10. reflect on the ground rules if high level of tension is observed
11. respect the set ground rules

Tools to Handle Conflicts Constructively

When conflict escalates, that often means that opinions are taking precedence over facts. Therefore you have to refocus all members on fact. Depending on the subject, two processes are recommended:

i) Problem Definition Process
   a. Agreement that an issue needs resolution
   b. An agreed-upon statement of the problem
   c. Unanimous identification of the root causes which needs to address
ii) Solution decision-making process
   a. A complete list of possible solutions
   b. A firm joint decision on the chosen solution
   c. A compete step-by-step roadmap to translate the decision to reality

Following are some suggested decision-making tools, from least structured to most strutured.

Informal discussion	This is least structured process for evaluating options. This is done by discussing a list of options and recording any conclusion in the evaluation form.
Brainstorming	This is not designed for objective decision-making but it can be an effective method

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Elimination	This eliminates unworkable choices by reducing a long list to something more manageable.
Consensus	This is a very interactive process where such individual accepts the group's decision on the basis of logic and feasibility.
Weighting against Goals	This is done by reviewing a list of remaining options and weighing them against the goals of the organisation, department or personal performance targets
Weighing against Consequences	This is done by listing optional solutions and predicting the likely consequences (potential costs/risks, possible benefits/rewards)
Prioritising	This is done by selecting the best solution from a list through ranking, rating, voting, forced pair comparison, or compromising
Paired Comparison	This process consists of a series of decisions between two alternatives. This is done by pairing all available alternatives then consolidating the results of each decision. Then you select the decisions having the highest scores
Combination	This is done by combining solutions that complement each other within a category. The list then will be shorter for the final choice.
Criteria Matrix	This is done through a chart with alternative solutions listed in the left column and the criteria to measure them across the top.

Conclusion

Conflict in meetings is not bad. It can be healthy when handled properly and can contribute to the effectiveness of the meeting. If the conflict is managed constructively and maintained at a moderate level during meetings, the team achieves the following:

❑ Teamwork & synergy in completing or fulfilling assigned tasks

❑ Motivation and high morale among team members

❑ Innovation and creativity in thinking through sharing of ideas

❑ Integration of opposing viewpoints on issued highlighted to achieve consensus

❑ Thorough understanding of ideas and interests that lie behind the team member's position.

We live and work in a world filled with stress and tension. Often the results of conflicts go unperceived, thereby undermining the trust and cooperation that are needed for the production of quality work.

A few things to remember when tempers flare on the job: don't react immediately, and maintain emotional distance from the situation. Also, don't engage in verbal warfare. Listen well, and wait before speaking; anger feeds off anger, but fades with time. Ask questions to find out why conflict occurred. Get as much information as possible, and don't regard second-hand communication as reliable.
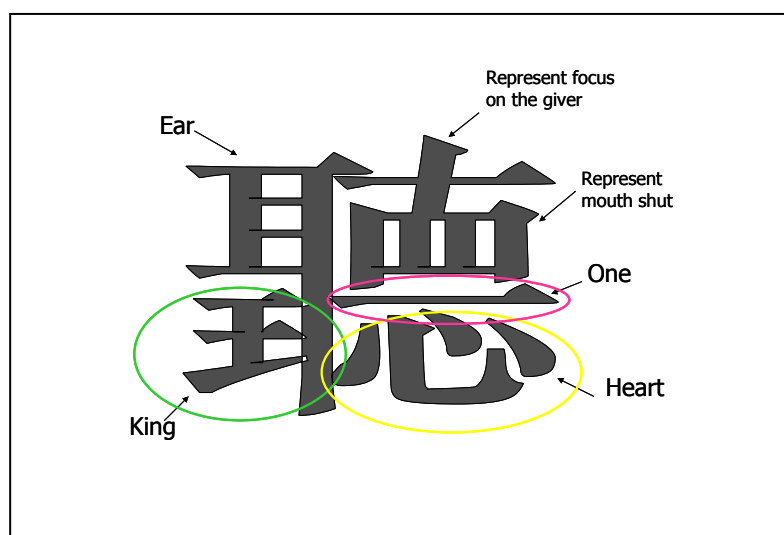
Chinese Character – "Listen"

About the Author

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