

## Managing Conflict in a Team and Resolving Issues

Written by Administrator

Monday, 21 February 2011 11:42 - Last Updated Friday, 25 March 2011 16:05

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Conflict is part and parcel of organisational life, and its consequences in a team environment are considerable. On the positive side, conflict can bring to a head unresolved issues and provide an opportunity for those involved to learn from the experience. On the other hand, disruption and ill-feeling can damage relationships externally with customers and suppliers and internally with colleagues and internal customers. It can stop dead in its tracks any potential synergy and creativity and thus stunt the growth of the organisation. At Cable and Wireless the conflict of the two most senior figures in the organisation led to such problems that both were asked to resign. A tragic example is at Grantham Hospital where a nurse, Beverley Alitt was not detected soon enough before killing patients in her care because members of the team were in conflict and failed to pass on to one another vital concerns they were privately noticing.

In this article the authors discuss how conflict should be managed by taking a proactive role in influencing the nature and style of handling difference and its outcome.

### **Why is conflict management important in a team environment?**

Increasingly, service organisations have become flatter and more complex, with many more overlapping responsibilities, cross functional responsibilities and project teams. This means there is a greater need to influence people, to understand their priorities and build commitment to a set of common customer-focused values, rather than really on power or hierarchy for mere compliance. In today's competitive environment people need to work well together across boundaries, whether between departments or countries. The pharmaceutical industry provides some powerful examples. Smithkline Beecham has had to work across national and old company boundaries to weld a single company with people whose roles, perspectives and aspirations are very different. This process is now being continued with their merger with Glaxo Wellcome.

### **How do you react to conflict?**

People's attitude to conflict is key. Many people back away from it, wary of the problems it may cause. This may lead to avoidance of potentially conflicting problem areas or attempts to suppress them if they break out. The authors worked with a customer service manager and their team to help them confront the behaviour of two team member which had a negative impact on customer service. Team members had been aware of the problem for some time but were unwilling to confront the issue. However, denial doesn't mean conflict goes away.

Some people relish conflict. The late Robert Maxwell was said to welcome provocation of a conflict, haranguing people in meetings and threatening them. Some customers may

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deliberately adopt this stance in an attempt to get their own way.

Avoidance and aggression are not the only ways people react to conflict. Other people may give in and collaborate with the person with whom they have a disagreement. This may lead to an apparent resumption of normal working relationships but this is often at the expense of one person's self esteem.

Others adopt a win/win approach to conflict by trying to reach a compromise with the person with whom they have difficulties. For example a customer service manager may agree to take on additional administration workload from another department if that department is prepared to help them out when they are busy. This can be fine in some instances but by its very nature compromise involves give and take. Research shows that few people adopt a collaborative attitude to conflict by looking for a solution which fully satisfies the needs of both parties. This latter approach requires a constructive approach to building common ground. Is the customer service the best department to take over the administration? Why has the need arisen in the first place? When are the busy peaks in the department? Is the other department acting as back-up the best use of resource? What are the options?

Overall observations of particularly effective customer service teams indicate substantially more building and supporting behaviours towards customers and colleagues than merely flatly stating obstacles and difficulties.



### Personality differences within the team

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This is put down as the commonest reasons for conflict; two people are simply incompatible, different as chalk and cheese. This approach tends towards fatalism - it is argued that we can't change our personality and therefore we can't expect conflict resolution. The problem with this approach is that the only way to resolve conflict is to remove one or both parties as a 'bad apple'. Research into personality certainly supports the view that different personalities and preferences see the world through different spectacles. We have used the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator and Belbin Team Roles very successfully to help people understand the range of possible personalities and behaviours and to see the behaviour of their colleagues in new ways. Different styles then stand a better chance of being appreciated rather than ridiculed or dismissed.

### **Lack of interpersonal skills**

Poor interpersonal skills are a strong contributory factor in many disputes. We worked with one young rapidly growing software house for several years on just this issue, emphasising

- listening skills, really hearing and understanding the other persons' point of view
- assertiveness, putting views over confidently and clearly
- negotiation skills, reaching an agreement acceptable to both parties
- meeting handling
- team working

The result has been, as one manager put it, 'We still have internal differences, but now we talk about them and try to resolve the issues rather than harbour grudges. We have improved how well we listen and question our customers and really understand their concerns'.

Research by Peter Honey supports this. If we state a disagreement we stand a 50% chance of being interrupted and a 33% chance someone will respond by disagreeing with us. Putting a statement as a question or as suggestion increases the likelihood of a positive response.

### **Role conflict, lack of clear objectives**

In our experience a lot of conflict arises because of unclear definition and understanding of roles and responsibilities and a lack of shared understanding of what they or the organisation should be doing. In a changing world we can't afford to be rigid, but understanding is important. At its worst, failure to do this has led to accidents and disasters as no one has been clear who was

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responsible for checking and ensuring safety and preventing a rail smash or plane accident. Harvester Restaurants manage its outlets through self-managing teams. They regularly meet to clarify who is doing what and review progress against targets they have a hand in setting.

### **Poor communication**

When people are starved of information rumour start and mistrust can arise. Surveys have repeatedly shown managers pronouncing that communication is vital, yet saying they are too busy to communicate regularly. Birmingham Midshires Financial Services lays great stress on communicating regularly with employees to keep them informed of the business position and provide relevant information which affects them. They conduct annual employee surveys to ensure the methods they use are effective.

One computer distributor discovered that it was receiving very high levels of customer returns. On analysing the problem, the root cause was seen to be the poor communication between the order processing and the logistics department. Members of both departments were encouraged to meet to air their problems. The meeting was facilitated and a questionnaire was used to guide the discussion. Participants were encouraged to actively listen to each other's points of view. The outcome of the meeting was a service level agreement which set out what each party expected of each other and an agreed way of working for the future. The agreement was regularly reviewed jointly, and by airing the differences there emerged much closer understanding.

### **Change and uncertainty**

Change and uncertainty are a breeding ground for conflict to develop. Cigna UK undertook a large-scale business process re-engineering. As implementation proceeded it took a lot of time and trouble to understand reservations and difficulties expressed by employees and build modifications into its plans. Lastly it involved customers in the process; change implementation teams invited groups of customers to come in to see how the change was going to affect them.

### **Lack of openness and shared values**

The less open a culture, the more differences can smoulder. One way to encourage greater openness is through 360 degree feedback, a method of gaining all-round performance feedback. Fedex is one of a growing number of companies who are using this method to build a more open climate where people can speak out. To promote commitment to a common set of values, healthcare provider BUPA agreed a set of leadership behaviours to encourage its managers to live its values. Managers throughout the business took part in a 360 degree feedback process which allowed individuals to receive feedback from their managers, peers and team members as to how well they were living the values.

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### What can be done to handle conflict effectively?

#### 1. Increase knowledge and skills in managing the conflict handling process

People working in environments where they need to manage angry or complaining customers, either inside or outside the organisation or which are undergoing a high degree of change often need to learn how to deal effectively with conflict. Here is the outline of a typical two day conflict handling workshop:

- Sources that create conflict between individuals
- The consequences of conflict
- Peoples' reaction to conflict
- Conflict management - The Thomas Kilmann model of conflict handling
- Skills and techniques for effectively managing conflict
- Defusing anger and aggression in other people
- Development of personal action plan

We have found the use of the Thomas Kilmann model of conflict handling insightful for participants on training workshops. This encourages people to consider the emphasis placed on getting the task done versus concern for preserving relationships. Through the use of a questionnaire, participants see the different ways they and their colleagues handle conflict and the consequences of different preferred styles. Another useful model is the win/win, win/lose model of negotiating which helps people understand the value of collaboration as means for both parties to be better off.

#### 2. Promote greater understanding of the value of diversity

An enemy of understanding others is the common assumption that the world should be the same as you, and if not then the other person or group is deficient or wrong.

The use of the Belbin Team Role inventory is worthwhile because the results make a lot of sense to those who complete it and understand how important it is to have a variety of different roles in a team. Another helpful tool is the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. It helps people to

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develop strategies and take practical steps to deal effectively with others who have different preferences from themselves.

### 3. Increase shared team understanding and values

To help promote understanding, sharing of common team aims and values is often used successfully. Team building needs experienced facilitation if it is not to degenerate into a false 'happy club' atmosphere or conversely where conflict gets out of hand. Equally, exercises to generate mission and values statements are meaningless if full involvement is not encouraged and actions and periodic reviews are not put in place.

The dangers of 'groupthink' and the Abilene Paradox should be pointed out (so-called because everyone in a family group went off to a town because no-one spoke up believing they were the only dissenters). This emphasises the pitfalls of a complacent group where speaking your mind is discouraged. Our experience suggests that this danger is more common than is widely acknowledged.

### 4. Recognise and address conflict in teams

Conflict is a common occurrence in teams, particularly those which are newly formed or where new team members join an established group. 'Storming' is a recognised phase of team development. When conflict does occur, it is no use looking in the other direction. Ignoring conflict does not make it go away.

If it is difficult for an individual team member to address conflict in their group, teams can draw on the help of a coach or facilitator. This person acts as a neutral and independent observer whose role is to help the group achieve its objectives. One of the authors recently facilitated a team away day for a group of senior managers. The team had been formed nine months previously but had never taken the opportunity to review how it worked together. As the day progressed, it became clear that there were serious differences of opinion and several personality clashes amongst team members. The facilitator helped the group to surface these issues in a non-threatening way.

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Although team members found the experience uncomfortable at the time, afterward they fed back that it had been cathartic and helped them look at better and more constructive ways of working together.

### 5. Clarify expectations

Clarifying expectations does much to ease tension where roles are hazy and misunderstandings build up ill-feeling. As a team exercise, we have used a simple format for team members to write down and then discuss on-to-one individual expectations with everyone in their team.

#### **Expectations Approach**

To perform your job effectively I believe you expect these things of me  
To perform my job effectively I expect these things from you

We have used this with newly formed project teams and with established teams as well as with internal and external customer groups.

#### **Steps to handling conflict**

If we were to put our advice into a nutshell we would pass on these steps to managing conflict.

- Understand how you typically respond to conflict. Practise being flexible and putting yourself in the other person's shoes.
- Listen carefully to words and feelings.
- Reflect back what has been said/felt to build greater respect and shared understanding.
- Be clear on your case but don't become so fixated by your point of view that you get tunnel

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vision on other perspectives.

- Be prepared to negotiate where necessary to reach an agreement which is acceptable to both parties in the long term as well as immediately.
- Review the implications of major decisions on other people and your own behaviour. Ask for feedback on how you handle conflict and set yourself some improvement goals.
- Communicate regularly and build relationships, even or especially when damage has been caused.

### Conclusion

Change and globalisation have brought about empowered, flatter customer service organisations which have put increasing pressure on individuals and groups to manage conflict both outside and within the organisation skilfully and not sweep it under the carpet. This requires proactive initiatives on the part of companies to increase the level of self-awareness among individuals and groups as well as build greater understanding of the value of diversity. In developing individual's skill levels in dealing with people, businesses promote a more open organisation which can build a greater commitment to shared values.

Conflict will always be hard to manage, however well-prepared and skilful people are. Retaining a sense of confidence and greater control over conflict are reported benefits of the approaches outlined above. This means trust and joint problem-solving are increased and loss of morale and disruption are much less likely.

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(Myers-Briggs Type Indicator is a registered trademark of Oxford Psychology Press)



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