

Conflict Management

Overview

Purpose

The purpose of this module is to enable participants to help teams identify and manage conflict.

Objectives

At the end of this module participants will be able to:

- Describe the positive and negative aspects of conflict.
- Recognize the source of a disagreement.
- Determine when and how to apply five conflict management styles.
- Determine how to deal with resistance.

Content

- Understanding Conflict
- Conflict Management Styles
- A Positive Approach to Resistance

Understanding Conflict

Conflict occurs when the concerns of two or more people appear to be incompatible and they disagree. Each individual has a personal definition of conflict and an individual tolerance for the stress associated with it. It is important for each team member to understand that others may have a different way of viewing and dealing with conflict

Conflict is a necessary and integral part of realistic and effective teamwork. It is the essence of sound decision making, because disagreement is the best vehicle for broadening perspectives, discovering alternatives, and stimulating creative interaction among team members. Dealing with conflict is necessary for the development of an effective team, and though it is often painful, it does not need to be destructive.

In the “storming” stage of development, the initial reluctance to express strong opinions that characterizes the “forming” stage typically is followed by a period of disagreement.¹ Members feel free to disagree with each other and with the team leader. Some of the questions, concerns, and even frustrations that people bring with them are now being expressed.

Some teams never go through this stage because they are fearful that the expression of differences will be destructive. Also, expression of differences may be culturally inappropriate in some countries. However,

¹ Parker, Glenn M. *Team Players and Teamwork*, San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1996

disagreement need not be heated or counterproductive. Quite the contrary; teams that fail to experience storming never learn how to deal with differences.

Consequences of conflict

The ways in which people choose to deal with conflict can have negative or positive consequences. For example, when the existence of conflict is ignored, it may be “taken care of” in a superficial way that makes it more difficult to confront and resolve later. But when conflict is managed well, the results can be positive with the conflict-management process leaving the group stronger and more cohesive.

It is difficult to predict whether a specific conflict will have a positive or negative consequence, because much depends on how the conflict is managed by team members. Conflict can be divisive and disruptive or it can be unifying and constructive. When mismanaged, conflict can destroy a team’s effectiveness; when handled well, it can greatly increase the quality of a team’s work and make members feel proud of their work in the team.

Negative Consequences

If not managed well, conflict’s negative results can include:

- A decrease in productivity.
- Unpleasant emotional experiences.
- A breakdown in work relationships.
- A reduction in the sharing of relevant information.
- Increased stress.
- Excessive use of time.
- Inappropriate allocation of resources.
- Disruption of the decision-making process.

Positive Consequences

However, if conflict is well-managed, some of the positive results include:

- The opportunity to change bothersome things.
- The airing of feelings and the resulting relief of tension.
- More effective clarification of people’s ideas.
- Better understanding of the positions of others.
- Stimulation of healthy interaction/involvement.
- Increased motivation and creativity.
- An increase in the number of alternatives identified.

Team Training in Conflict Management

Training in conflict management methods is critical for all people who participate on QA teams. There are four main goals for conflict

management training.

- Dispel negative notions about conflict.
- Recognize the sources of disagreement.
- Adopt a variety of conflict management styles.
- Express, appreciate, and manage resistance.

Goal: Dispel negative notions about conflict.

The initial goal in conflict management training is to dispel the notion that conflict is automatically negative. When team members see that conflict can be a positive force, they are better prepared to adopt effective attitudes and behaviors in problem-solving situations. The coach will help the team succeed if he or she can teach members to recognize and understand the potential positive nature of conflict and to resolve disagreements in positive ways.

Goal: Recognize the sources of disagreement.

In general, conflict results from disagreement about four kinds of things.

- **Facts:** People view a situation or problem from different perspectives and disagree about what is important, or there are different facts supporting each side of a conflict.
- **Methods:** People disagree about the best way to do something.
- **Goals:** People disagree about what they should be working toward.
- **Values:** People disagree about what values are important, or what enduring qualities they should support.

Generally, it is easiest to resolve differences over facts (characteristic of an *issue*) and most difficult to settle differences over values (characteristic of a *person*). Values are based on differences in moral, ideological, or philosophical outlook. They tend to be deeply rooted in upbringing, education, culture, and religious orientation and, therefore, very resistant to change. The more homogeneous the value orientation of people on a team, the less likely it is that conflict based on these issues will occur. Also, in an organization with clear mission, vision and value statements, teams that share those values are unlikely to have conflict based on values.

Goal: Adopt a variety of conflict management styles

Team members need to learn about different styles of conflict management, to be able to use an appropriate intervention when conflict occurs. Five styles are explained later in this module.

Goal: Express, appreciate, and manage resistance.

Team members need to know when to express resistance, how to express it appropriately so that the results are positive for all those concerned, and

how to deal with another person's resistance. Methods for seeking out and dealing with resistance are addressed later in this module.

Conflict Management Styles

The five approaches to conflict management identified by the Thomas-Kilmann model are summarized in Figure 1 below.² This chart may be reviewed with team members to discuss ways in which conflicts can be managed effectively within the team. When team members understand the nature of conflict and constructive methods to manage it, they usually can work out disagreements on their own. When they cannot, or when the problem requires an intervention for other reasons, the coach may have to help the team reach a solution

Figure 1: Conflict Management Styles³

Conflict Management Styles	Characteristic Behavior	Justification for Use
Avoiding	Non-confrontational. Ignores or passes over issues. Denies issues are a problem.	Differences are too minor or too great to resolve. Other attempts might damage relationships or create even greater problems.
Accommodating	Agreeable, non-assertive behavior. Cooperative even at the expense of personal goals.	Not worth risking damage to relationships or general harmony. Differences exist, but can be put aside.
Competing (Win/Lose)	Confrontational, assertive, and aggressive. "Winning" is good; "losing" is bad.	Survival of the fittest. Must demonstrate superiority.
Compromising	Parties seek quick middle-ground position that provides partial satisfaction for both parties. Maintains good relationships. Aggressive, but cooperative.	No one person or idea is perfect. There is more than one way to do anything. Both sides give up something.
Collaborating or Problem-Solving (Win/Win)	Needs of both parties are legitimate and important. High respect for mutual support. Assertive and cooperative.	When parties openly discuss issues, a mutually beneficial solution can be found without anyone making a major concession. May also be called consensus.

² Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument, 1974 discussed in Schwarz, Roger M. *The Skilled Facilitator*, San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1994.

³ Adapted from Maddux, R. B., *Team Building: An Exercise in Leadership*, Los Altos, California: Crisp Publications, 1992..

There is no single “correct” conflict management style. Each style represents a set of useful skills that should be developed. The more alternate styles you have to draw from, the better your chances for success. Figure 2 shows when to use each style and its potential consequences.

Figure 2: When To Use Different Conflict Management Styles

Style	Use When	Possible Negative Consequences
Avoiding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Issue is trivial. Issue is too important - no chance of success. Confrontation is damaging. Need to reduce tension. Need more information. Others can resolve conflict more effectively. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Decisions made by default. Unresolved issues. Self-doubt created through lack of esteem. Creative input and improvement prevented. Lack of credibility.
Accommodating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You are wrong. Issue vital to other person. “Credit” needed for more important issues – you “give in” now, they “give-in” later Competition hurts your cause. Harmony is most important. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Too much deference decreases your influence. Frustration increases as own needs are not met. Your self-esteem is undermined. May not find the best solution.
Competing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Quick action is needed. Unpopular action is needed on important issue. One view is right on a vital issue. To stimulate non-competitive members. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> One side may be afraid to admit ignorance. Creates distorted perceptions. Limits communication. May damage relationships. Must always “sell” solution. There is always a “loser”
Compromising	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Goals are not worth continued conflict. Opponents are strongly committed to different goals, but can compromised on methods. Temporary solution is needed. Quick solution is needed. Other efforts have failed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Because each side “gives in” no one is fully satisfied. Solution may be short-lived. May lose sight of larger issues or values by focusing on practicalities.
Collaborating Consensus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Decision is too important for compromise. Need to test assumptions or degree of understanding. Different perspectives must be merged. Need greater commitment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Time may be wasted on less significant issues. Decisions swayed by input from people unfamiliar with situation. Assumptions about trust may be

	Mending hard feelings between members.	unfounded.
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Some conflict situations are so common that it helps for a team to have ideas about how to handle them. Figure 3 lists ways to handle some specific situations.

Figure 3: How To Handle Specific Conflict Situations

Misunderstanding Perceptions	Disagreement Over Course of Action	Defense of Ego: Person Feels Attacked
Ask for clarification of perceptions.	Listen and clarify perceptions.	Let members express their concerns, but do not permit personal attacks.
Establish a supportive, rather than a defensive climate.	Make sure issues are clear to all team members.	Use "Active Listening."
Employ "Active Listening."	Use a problem-solving approach to manage differences of opinions.	Call for a calming down time.
Stop.		Encourage parties to be descriptive, rather than judgmental.
Look.	Focus discussion on the issues.	
Listen.	Use facts rather than opinions for evidence.	Try to keep discussion focused on issues.
Question.	Look for alternatives or compromise positions.	Use a problem-solving approach to manage differences of opinion.
Paraphrase Content.		Speak slowly and calmly.
Paraphrase Feelings.	Make the conflict a team concern, rather than an individual concern.	Develop rules or procedures that create a relationship that allows for the personality difference.
	Determine which conflicts are most important to resolve.	
	If possible, postpone the decision while additional research is conducted. The delay can also relieve tensions.	

Interpersonal Conflict

It often is worthwhile to clarify the different sides of an interpersonal conflict by examining one's own viewpoint as a starting point. This

examination may use the following key questions:

- What kind of relationship do I want to have with this person after this disagreement has passed?
- What specific behaviors that the other person exhibits present problems for me?
- What effects do the other person's behavior have on me?
- What changes in the other person's behavior would I like to see?
- Can I state the problem clearly and share my feelings without confusing or blaming the other person?
- If the other person becomes defensive or aggressive, do I practice effective listening?
- How effectively can I use systematic problem-solving approaches to deal with difficult situations?
- Do I and the person with whom I have a conflict negotiate "space" for ourselves so that disagreements about values have minimum impact?

A Positive Approach to Resistance

Frequently in a team environment, cooperation is seen as a universally good reaction; therefore, resistance – as its opposite – is often seen as bad or negative. Everyone has heard admonitions such as "Don't be defensive," "You've got to learn to compromise," or "You're only thinking of your own welfare."

The ability to resist can be a personal asset because it keeps one from being hurt and overloading oneself. It enables a person to make clearer choices about what is good for him or her, and it helps in blocking out unimportant distractions that would hinder the achievement of their goals. Resistance can also be seen as a team asset in that it allows the team to differentiate talent, provides new information about what might not work well, and produces a lot of needed energy.

Low-yield Strategies to Deal with Resistance

Resistance has traditionally been devalued, so many team leaders – as well as other team members – tend to use one or more low-yielding strategies to deal with it.

- **Breaking Resistance Down.** The attempt to break down resistance is may be carried out by threatening, coercing, "selling," or reasoning – argument or logic to "fight" with the person who is resisting.
- **Avoiding Resistance.** This strategy is carried out by ignoring resistance, "not hearing," or attempting to induce guilt on the part of the person who is resisting.
- **Discounting Resistance.** This approach involves dismissing the resistance as unimportant, promoting tradition as the alternative to resistance, or appealing to the resister's need to conform.

Low-yield strategies may work to change the resister's behavior in the short run but they rarely provide lasting solutions and can be costly. Using strategies such as threats and attempts to induce guilt may produce even more, and deeper, resistance later.

Dealing Positively with Resistance

Dealing appropriately with resistance is an important skill for team members. Two basic assumptions underlie a positive approach to dealing creatively with resistance:

- **Resistance exists.** People will always resist, knowingly or not, those things they perceive as not being in their best self-interest.
- **Resistance needs to be honored.** It must be dealt with in a respectful manner.

After incorporating these two assumptions, resistance becomes a team asset and can enhance rather than injure a relationship between any two people, be they coach and team leader, team leader and member, or two team members. It is vital that a team become skilled in a positive approach to resistance.

Steps in a Positive Approach to Resistance

The positive approach consists of four separate steps⁴:

1. Surfacing.
2. Honoring.
3. Exploring.
4. Rechecking.

For the positive approach to work it is necessary for the **demandor** – the individual who confronts the resister – to make absolutely clear what he or she wants from the **resister** and must be as specific as possible in relating this information to the resister. Stating this demand in terms of specific time frames, outcomes, potential benefits, concrete behaviors, etc., increases the probability the demandor will achieve compliance. Even if compliance is not possible, the resistance becomes more workable.

When the demandor and the resister meet, they should complete each step in turn.

Surfacing the Resistance

After the demandor has clearly stated what he or she wants from the resister, the first and probably most difficult step is to get the resistance out in the

⁴ Adapted from Fossum, Lynn, *Understanding Organizational Change*, Menlo Park, California: Crisp Publications, 1989.

open. Many people intentionally withhold their resistance for a number of reasons: a past heavy use of the low-yield strategies; mistrust; a poor interpersonal relationship; or a lack of awareness of their own resistance. The surfacing of resistance can be approached easily and effectively by keeping two guidelines in mind:

- Make the expression of resistance as “safe” as possible.

The demander should state clearly – publicly, if possible – that he or she wants to hear the resistance. It is a good idea to be straightforward and to include an explanation of why the resistance is important. Once the resister is aware that he or she is not going to be attacked, punished, or “sold” on what the demander wants, the demander has a much greater chance of exposing the real source of the resistance. For example: “I don’t agree with your opinion, but I’d like to understand it better – perhaps there is room for both of our views”

- Ask for it all.

Listening to a resister’s statement of what he or she does not like about the very thing the demander wants is rarely a pleasant experience for the demander. Nevertheless, it is the best approach to resistance. When the resistance exists, it is much better to hear all of it than to try to work through the situation in partial ignorance. Use effective questioning to clarify what is being said, summarize the main points that are made and ask “is there anything else you want to say to help me understand?” or “is there anything I’ve missed?”

Honoring the Resistance

Honoring involves the following process.

- Listen.

When a person states resistance openly, he or she provides the demander with a vital source of information about what the demander wants and the potential pitfalls in achieving this. In addition, the resister is making a personal statement about who he or she is. Any attempt to discount the information not only stops the information but also carries a clear message to the resister that his or her opinion does not matter; the resister will interpret this to mean that he or she does not matter. It is critical at this stage that the demander make no attempt to reinforce his or her original position, to sell, to reason, or in anyway imply that the resister should not feel as he or she does. The correct approach is simply to listen – use active listening, effective feedback and effective questioning.

- Acknowledge the resistance.

The act of acknowledgment does not imply that the demander agrees with the point of resistance. It is a simple affirmation of the resister's right to resist. Statements such as "I see how that could be a problem for you" or "You certainly have a right to be concerned" allow the demander to respond to the resister's concern without relinquishing anything. The demander should acknowledge the resistance but not agree with it.

- Reinforce the notion that it is permissible to resist.

The demander should keep in mind that openly resisting in a safe environment may be a new experience for the resister. Periodically reinforcing that resistance is valuable and that the resister is not only safe, but appreciated for stating his or her resistance, creates a positive atmosphere. Statements such as "It's all right that you don't like all of this" or "I can see why you are angry" maintain the demander's control of the situation while continuing to make the environment safe for the resister.

Exploring the Resistance

Exploring involves the following tasks.

- Distinguish authentic resistance from "pseudo" resistance.

Authentic resistance is directed toward the specific demand that has been made; pseudo resistance is real but has nothing to do with the demand. "Pseudo" resistance usually originates in feelings such as resentment of authority, old grudges, the need for attention, or lack of clarity about one's desires. The demander's task is to uncover the authentic resistance. If the demander is having difficulty determining which kind of resistance is manifesting itself, he or she can simply ask the resister, "What is your objection?" The resister either will or will not be able to state clearly what the specific objection is. It is best to wait to address the cause of the "pseudo" resistance later unless it is blocking progress.

- Probe the resistance.

Once the resistance has surfaced, been honored, and judged authentic and the resister has realized that he or she is safe, the demander can help the resister assume a proactive stance by simply asking, "What would you prefer?" In responding to this question, the resister works with the demander toward the objective rather than against it. The resister will suggest alternative approaches to meeting the demand in ways that provide the demander with what is wanted and permit the resister to obtain something for himself or herself at the same time. At this point, it is a good idea to encourage negotiation and to keep in mind that something must change

positively for the resister in order for the resistance to be permanently reduced. The end point of probing should be the development of some kind of agreement about the action to be taken.

Rechecking

- Recheck the status of current resistance agreement.

Before the meeting is over, the last step is to recheck the status of the current resistance and the agreements that have been made. This step is essential because it provides closure to the issue and ensures that no agreement will be forgotten.

- Recheck at the beginning of the next meeting.

If there is to be second meeting, rechecking provides a basis on which to start the next meeting so the entire process of dealing with the resistance does not have to be repeated.

Key Points When Dealing with a Resister

The demander should always keep the following points in mind when confronting a resister.

- The objective is not to eliminate all resistance because it is not possible to do so. Instead, the objective is to work with and reduce needless resistance. The reduction is usually enough to proceed with the demand effectively.
- Always keep paper and pencil handy to make notes during the process. When the problem is recorded, the resister's objection is honored and there is less chance important points will be forgotten. Making notes also facilitates the last step, rechecking.
- Once the resistance is at a workable level, thank the resister and move on. It is important not to try to persuade the resister to like the demand. It is enough that the resister is willing to agree to it.

This approach has universal application. It is valuable not only in team building and team development but also in any situation in which resistance is an issue, whether it is managing conflict, scheduling work, or rearing children.

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