

Third Quarter, 1996



SB Strategy & Business
...Booz, Allen & Hamilton

Turning Conflict into a Tool for Team Effectiveness

(Page 1 of 4) ▶

By **Valerie I. Sessa**

Judy, the marketing manager at a large pharmaceutical company, dropped her head in her hands in exasperation. As the leader of a cross-functional project management team, she was expected to get a new drug launched in six months. But she had no direct control over the other team members, all of whom had to commit their entire departments to meet the production deadlines.

These were reasonable people, Judy thought, recalling times she had worked with each of them, one-on-one. In a team setting, however, the dynamics changed and her colleagues unleashed their own agendas. They came from various disciplines within the company and had so many different perspectives and ideas about priorities and procedures that the team was quickly mired in conflict.

Judy was beginning to think that the team approach, which sounded so wonderful when the consultants presented it and which the company was now pushing, would never work in real life. Indeed, she didn't think that her angry and frustrated team would ever get that new drug launched.

As organizations increasingly turn to teams -- from top management committees to self-directed work groups -- the hope is that the new approach will improve productivity by increasing creativity, energy and performance. However, our mental picture of teamwork and what relationships between team members should be is unrealistic.

Often overlooked is that teams create a variety of problems, and that these problems are inextricably linked to the very benefits they are also likely to produce. For example, the members of a cross-functional team, such as Judy's group at the pharmaceutical company, have different information, ideas and perspectives about how the team should proceed, what the important issues are, how to solve problems and even what roles each member should play. Conflict is inevitable. But is it bad?

The answer is no. In fact, research demonstrates that conflict can be beneficial for the team. Often, the first reaction to conflict is to become angry or distressed and to try to eliminate the "problem." But a better reaction would be to more fully understand the issues that are causing the disagreements, minimize the liabilities that anger generally brings and use the conflict to the team's advantage.

How can this be done? By changing our assumptions about conflict in three ways.



Third Quarter, 1996



SB Strategy & Business
...Booz, Allen & Hamilton

Turning Conflict into a Tool for Team Effectiveness

◀(Page 2 of 4)▶

First, we need to recognize that conflict arises naturally in teams. As noted, when team members meet, each brings a myriad of pre-existing perspectives, beliefs and knowledge. These differences are the reasons why the teams were put together in the first place. If everyone believes or knows the same thing, there would be no need for teams. Yet these very differences predispose teams toward conflict.

Second, we need to understand that conflict is not an isolated occurrence. Conflict occurs throughout team interactions in episodes that start with an expression of disagreement, and end when the team either resolves the issue or changes the subject. Conflict arises in one of two forms: task-oriented or people-oriented. Task-oriented conflict concerns the substance of the work, such as ideas or procedures. People-oriented conflict occurs with struggles for leadership, unequal workloads and personality differences. Both types of conflict can occur at the same time.

While either type can have a positive influence on team performance, task-oriented conflict offers the bigger payoff. Performance is what we typically think about when we consider effectiveness; it is the team's productive output in terms of decisions or solutions. Conflict in general forces members to address some of their assumptions and override their striving for premature unanimity, thus leading to better performance. Teams engaged in task-oriented conflict direct their actions toward their work; the conflict forces them to be concerned with task functions and related issues.

By contrast, people-oriented conflict, though it affects the team's very survival and development, is by definition more inward-looking, and thus offers less of a direct payoff in performance. During such conflict, actions are directed toward members' relations with each other, rather than the team's agenda.

Third, we need to question the assumption that conflict and negative emotion go hand-in-hand, or that negative emotion is a type of conflict. Emotion and conflict interact in far more sophisticated ways to affect team performance.

Team emotions may be viewed as having two components: tone and arousal. Recent research demonstrates that the *amount* of conflict leads to arousal, whereas the *type* of conflict leads to positive or negative tones of voice used by team members.

Too much or too little arousal is detrimental to team effectiveness, while some amount is likely to be beneficial. People-oriented conflict leads to a negative tone, whereas task-oriented conflict leads to a neutral or even a positive tone. Teams projecting a positive tone during a task-oriented conflict might suggest more alternatives to the problems they are weighing, whereas teams projecting a negative tone tend to rehash the alternatives originally suggested without reaching a conclusion.



Third Quarter, 1996



SB Strategy & Business
...Booz, Allen & Hamilton

Turning Conflict into a Tool for Team Effectiveness

◀(Page 3 of 4)▶

Because conflict and corresponding emotions are inevitable and underlie team effectiveness, we need to aim, not at reducing conflict, but at insuring that the conflict and the corresponding emotions are beneficial.

For example, team discussions can be complex, so correct understanding is crucial. One way that team members can insure understanding is through an approach known as perspective-taking -- that is, engaging in communication that leads to the accurate understanding of how other team members think and feel about a situation, and why they are behaving as they are. Thus, they can comprehend both the information being presented by those who disagree with them and also the perspective from which the disagreement comes.

Cartoon by Roz Chast

There are many techniques that members can use to determine another person's perspective. These include: 1) self disclosure, to offer your own yardstick to measure a difference in views; 2) role reversal, to take the other member's view to understand where she is coming from and why she feels as she does; and 3) active listening, to listen closely to what is being said, ask questions about content and feelings and repeat back to a team member what you have heard (to make sure you heard it right and that your colleague said it the way she intended).

Managers can also lead the team through exercises designed to determine the different perspectives held by members and their importance to the team as a whole. One such exercise that I developed, the Information Importance Grid, helps members outline these differences and their relative importance.



That exercise proved useful to Judy, in the example above, who learned that her team members had ideas, concerns and perspectives that needed to be discussed. She prepared the team for perspective-taking by acknowledging that she had some ideas about where she wanted the team to go, but knew from previous meetings that there were conflicts to address. She started by getting those issues on the table in list form, without comment. When one member attempted to disagree with another about a concern, Judy said, "All of these issues are important, and different issues are naturally more important to some departments than to others. Let's see if we can hash out the problems and get this list narrowed into a manageable few issues to discuss and work on now, and maybe put together a separate list of things that we can address next."



Third Quarter, 1996



SB Strategy & Business
...Booz, Allen & Hamilton

Turning Conflict into a Tool for Team Effectiveness

◀(Page 4 of 4)

Team members disclose more information when others use perspective-taking. In addition, the approach helps people frame their own messages so that they are more easily understood by others. Finally, it encourages team members to consider other perspectives during discussions, and thus achieve greater success.

With greater perspective-taking skills, team members will understand that others have different views and will anticipate disagreements. They will more likely respond to conflict by attempting to understand the other person. Those who do not understand or take the others' perspectives will be less tolerant of conflict, and will tend to respond by attacking the person instead of the task. Although this seems obvious, research suggests that team members often discuss information they hold in common, but tend not to share information that only they know and that in trying to elicit much-needed information through perspective-taking, team members are more likely to produce task-oriented conflict than spats between people.

Organizations are intentionally creating situations where people can argue about their differences of opinion with the hope that greater team effectiveness will result. However, until teams learn to harness their potential in a synergistic manner, it will be difficult to manage the many assets and liabilities inherent in the way they work.

In short, team members need to become comfortable with conflict and even learn how to create it without fear that they will destroy the team.

