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Conflict Resolution and the Project Manager

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Introduction

Project managers deal with conflict. If you are a project manager, and you have not yet experienced conflict in your project, don't be overly concerned - you will soon enough. At some point in your career, you will be called upon to resolve some type of conflict. At times this will be fairly easy, but on many occasions the resolution of the conflict will be challenging. Some conflicts stem from forces and events that are internal to the project, while others derive from external events and forces. Whenever there are two or more of just about anything and people are involved, there is the potential for conflict. It's a natural consequence of being human and occurs in relationships of every kind. A good project manager always attempts to understand and analyze the nature of any problem he or she is dealing with.

What Is Conflict?

One way of analyzing and understanding a problem is by asking questions that may be directly or indirectly related. A possible first step from a project management point of view is to define what conflict is and what it is not. Therefore, we begin with the question, what is conflict? Following are some of the definitions that seem to fit the context of this discussion:

1. A state of disharmony between incompatible or antithetical persons, ideas, or interests; a clash
2. A psychic struggle, often unconscious, resulting from the opposition or simultaneous functioning of mutually exclusive impulses, desires, or tendencies
3. Opposition between characters or forces in a work

According to Wikipedia¹:

Conflict is a state of discord caused by the actual or perceived opposition of needs, values, and interests between people. Conflict as a concept can help explain many aspects of social life, such as social disagreement, conflicts of interests, and fight between individuals, groups, or organizations.

Conflict as taught for graduate and professional work in conflict resolution commonly has the definition: "when two or more parties, with perceived incompatible goals, seek to undermine each other's goal-seeking capability."

One should not confuse the distinction between the presence and absence of conflict with the difference between competition and cooperation.

Conflict can occur in cooperative situations, in which two or more individuals or parties have consistent goals, because the manner in which one party tries to reach their goal can still undermine the other individual or party.

The old business view of conflict was that it was inevitable, it was always negative, and should be avoided if at all possible. If it could not be avoided, at some point, upper management should intervene. The new view of conflict, however, which the PMI embraces, is that conflict can, at times, be necessary and beneficial, help foster team growth, enhance creativity, and is best resolved by the team members themselves along with their immediate manager. Only if an issue cannot be resolved in this manner should it be addressed elsewhere.

Some project managers still feel that conflict is something that should be avoided at all costs, but in many workplace environments – especially those where people have differing backgrounds, experiences, world views, and values – conflict can be said to be inevitable.

For most people, conflict is a natural fact of life. Often it is unavoidable, and some feel it is even *needed* for innovation and creativity in teamwork. In most project situations, conflict is manageable and should not be viewed as positive or negative. As stated earlier, it is simply an opposition of values, ideas, goals, etc., and is largely about perceptions.

Constructive vs. Destructive Conflict

A project team with no conflict is a good thing, right? Be careful what you ask for, because not all project conflict is bad. As long as the established boundaries and limits are adhered to, conflict can be productive for growth and development.

Some good things can come out of conflict:

- People learn to work together.
- The team experiences increased amounts of energy, because conflict does not allow the team to stay stagnant; it causes them to move forward.
- It can foster creativity by forcing team members to see things from new points of view that they would never have thought of otherwise.
- Positive conflict can build cohesiveness among group members.
- Individuals and groups learn to grow and apply their knowledge to future conflict.

Quite often conflict can be constructive, especially when it has the effect of increasing the involvement of everyone and opens up discussions of issues resulting in increased clarification, as in the examples above; when it helps to identify alternatives; results in a solution; or serves as a release for pent-up emotions, anxieties, and stress. Beneficial conflict is more along the lines of a good healthy technical discussion.

On the other hand, not every type of conflict is useful. When does conflict become unhealthy? When does it become destructive? The easy answer is when it becomes counterproductive or when it keeps returning. Whenever it becomes a barrier and an obstacle to reaching the goals and objectives of your project, and/or has become a stumbling block to continue to work with healthy team relations, the conflict is no longer beneficial. When it does not lead to a decision or causes new negative behavior and the problem remains, the problem is not beneficial. Conflict is also destructive when it diverts energy from more important activities and issues, destroys the morale of individuals and groups, reinforces poor self-concept, divides people and polarizes groups, produces irresponsible behavior, and especially when it becomes personal.

The Main Sources of Conflict

Another question that is often asked, is if there are any common issues that can lead to conflict more than others?

Conflict often results from perception, or even more typically, misperception. Have you ever seen two people argue from the same point of view not realizing they were doing so? The question then becomes, why are they arguing? The answer often is they had simply stopped listening to each other and are arguing or disagreeing based upon the past.

While the conflict may seem to be coming from a simple misunderstanding or disagreement, in reality, it may stem from previous conflicts that the two parties were involved in. Have you heard the old saying that when people enter into a new relationship of any kind, that they sometimes bring baggage with them from previous relationships of a similar nature? Sometimes this "baggage" is the cause of the conflict.

Conflict can also come from personality differences, differing viewpoints and values, a lack of trust, a lack of overall communication, lack of respect and empathy, differing norms and schedules, differing levels of authority, differences in temperament, and unmet expectations (both stated and unstated), as well as different backgrounds (educational, economic, cultural, political, etc.). PMI's view is that conflict often arises from schedules, project priorities, resources, technical opinions, administrative processes, costs issues, and problems and issues related to personalities.

If you are dealing with this type of situation, what should you do? Establish the primary rule: team members who argue have to work it out amongst themselves or suffer the dictatorial ruling of the manager (YOU!).

When dealing with conflicts, either perceptual or personal, you must be patient, listen, and be careful to keep your emotions out of it. Above all else, do not forget the project time-line. Get to a resolution and get moving.

Types of Project Conflict

The types of conflict most project managers will be called upon to deal with include:

- **Intrapersonal** – An internal conflict, perhaps over one's own values. This can occur when someone is asked to lead and/or participate in a task or activity in which they either do not agree, or have not yet bought into.
- **Interpersonal** – A conflict between two or more people
- **Intra-group** – Conflict that occurs within a group, sometimes over tasks or group relationships
- **Inter-group or department** – Conflict between groups, perhaps due to competition for resources
- **Intra-organizational** – Conflict that occurs between the organizational levels, like management, and can be seen in "rank and file" structures
- **Inter-organizational** – Conflict that occurs between organizations, during a merger or acquisition for example, or during normal project work when utilizing inter-organizations and contractors

Recognizing Disruptive Conflict

Project managers must also learn to recognize the signs and symptoms of disruptive conflict. Such signs would include poor communication among team members, a lack of openness, a lack of respect, not showing appre-

ciation, unclear goals, and even an excessive amount of paid time off and high rates of attrition (people leaving the organization or group).

As previously mentioned, conflict can be a positive force, but it can turn destructive if unchecked. It can lower morale, decrease productivity, and sap creativity. So much energy can be spent on dealing (or most likely not dealing) with conflict that there is not enough time for other important tasks. The worst cases can disintegrate into personal stress, burnout, and workplace travesties.

Disruptive conflict can start small and turn into a larger conflict very quickly. Once conflict has reached this stage, it will require a large amount of management time in order to deal with it. This will cause an additional decrease in productivity and efficiency rates, along with the accompanying added costs, risks, and duration delays. If left unmanaged, this type of conflict can even lead to employee sabotage and workplace violence.

Conflict among the Team

When there is conflict among team members, project managers must build consensus; in other words, get everyone to agree. If left alone and unresolved, conflict may cause high levels of stress, low morale, low productivity, staff turnover, lack of trust, and even a poisoned environment. There are three typical reactions to conflict: fight (argue about it), flight (give in and run away), and freeze (don't know what to say/do).

The first step to dealing with conflict is to identify it. This is not always an easy process. Some team members will go out of their way to hide conflict from the project manager, while others will seek to misdirect the source of the conflict as a way of avoiding the situation.

Once identified, care must be taken to select the proper conflict resolution strategy. The goal of conflict resolution is to encourage trust and solicit feedback from everyone, (especially quiet/introverted members of the team). Acknowledge that there is disagreement, but focus your efforts on the commonalities. Take baby steps to build on incremental agreements. Conflict resolution is often a time-consuming task; be prepared to spend the time to make the process work. The process will be easier if everyone is using his or her best communication skills.

An Internet quote² is useful here; "It's funny, but wherever I put my eyes, they see things from MY point of view." Wherever I am looking, whatever I am seeing, whatever information I am processing, I naturally perceive that from my own point of view. It takes conscious effort to see things from another's perspective.

Methods of Dealing with Conflict

A good project manager should always seek to understand how he or she identifies conflict. Ask yourself questions such as: How do I identify conflict? How do I know who is at fault? What should I do to eliminate conflict?

Before you can begin getting your team back on track, you need them to calm down and re-focus. Do not get involved in debate or let emotions take control. You need to get at the facts behind the issue, not conjecture and emotions.

Ideally, the best method to dealing with conflict is to get the team to solve the problem themselves. But if you have to get involved:

- Find out the real problem, not the symptoms
- Ask lots of questions from various viewpoints. It is possible for everyone to have an opinion as long as the leader ensures that everyone is permitted to voice their opinion.
- Do they have a solution to offer? Is it likely the opposition will agree? If they have no solution, help lead them to one.
- Get agreement to the solution.
- THEY must find the solution without being forced in order for them to buy into it.



According to Thomas and Killman (2002)⁴, there are various ways for dealing with conflict (see figure 1). They fall somewhere on two axes: concern for others versus concern for self. Some models are more successful than others. Skilled communicators know when to apply each of these methods and how the various strategies may be used in combination.

Every situation is different and needs to be judged on its own merits. Often, the choice of the approach or method is based upon that which provides a solution and which provides a long-lasting solution versus a temporary fix.

The “My-way” method typically promotes coercion or competition – a difficult dynamic to sustain (becomes “my way or the highway”). In this situation, one side uses their power over the other to force a decision to be made or a solution to be agreed upon. This creates a win-lose situation. It does result in a solution, but it’s not the “best” as seen by the “losing” party. The only time this method might be absolutely necessary is during an emergency when a manager must require compliance immediately because of safety or legal reasons. Still, it is usually better to avoid this strategy, because it often promotes a win-lose attitude.

The “No-way,” “Avoidance,” or “Withdrawal” method often does not result in a solution, making it counterproductive. This occurs when one side will not address the conflict and will instead walk away from the issue, resulting in a lose-lose situation. It is a temporary fix or solution, which only begs the problem to resurface until it is dealt with, either effectively or not. It may be minimally used, however, if you need to buy time to cool off or get additional information.

The “Your-way” or “Accommodation” method is capitulation, but it may be successful if the other side has previously done the same, or if there is no other alternative and the relationship must be sustained. Quite often it is accomplished by downplaying the differences of each side. In this way, the disagreeing members will be more likely to compromise.

The “Half-way” or “Compromising” method can work under the same circumstances as those for “your way”. A compromise means that both sides have to give up something in order to find common ground. In this case, neither side totally wins, but neither side totally loses.

A true compromise is possible only when all parties involved attempt to meet all of the parties halfway. This occurs when there is equal concern for others as there is for yourself. Each side gives and each side gets. Everyone gives just enough so all parties end up satisfied.

The downside of compromise stems from the fact that many people see a compromise not as a win-win solution, but as a lose-lose proposition. They either feel they gave too much or did not receive enough, no matter what it was they gave or received during the compromise. The “what” becomes relatively unimportant in these situations, and it is the “how much” that becomes the focus, correctly or incorrectly. What you end up with is an “MUC” – a mutually unacceptable compromise where neither side will be committed to making the proposed solution to the problem actually work. It also faces the danger of one side not getting what it wants (known as the “tyranny of the majority”). A compromise in this manner is seen as a temporary solution.

The power of the “Our-way” or “Collaboration” method is often most successful for long-term results, because it gets the buy-in of everyone who is involved in the outcome, creating a win-win solution. It does, however, require the most time and effort, and that is the reason it may not be employed as often as it should.

In theory the Collaboration method works great, but in a real-world situation it may not be feasible. For example, if two children are fighting over an orange, as adults we may be tempted to offer the following solution: simply cut the orange and half. Each child receives half an orange and is told to go away and leave the adults alone. But with this approach, we must go further. Ask each child why they want the orange. Perhaps one child wants the orange because he or she is thirsty, and wants to drink the juice from the fruit. The other child may want the orange in order to obtain the seeds, plant them, and grow additional oranges. Simply splitting the orange between the children would result in only a partial success.

With an “Our way/collaborating” approach, based upon the children’s needs, you can accommodate both parties. You must first build consensus within your group about a strategy (both children desire different parts of the orange). Then, make certain that is the best strategy and that you have the time to successfully implement it. One child can remove the seeds as the other presses the fruit to extract the juice. During the process, solicit feedback from everyone (brainstorming can be a useful tool here). Acknowledge disagreement, but focus on the things that everyone can agree on, and stay positive while taking small steps, and you will be successful.

Sometimes the “Our way” method is possible, but at times it is not, such as when there is not enough time to reach a solution. In any case, it always requires a project manager to work harder and dig even deeper in order to understand the “why” of the disagreement.

Confrontation is also known as problem-solving. The word confrontation may sound negative, but in this context it isn't. It means you are simply dealing with and attempting to solve a problem. This can be done in several ways, but all of them require you to begin by researching the facts of the conflict and then making a decision based upon those facts. It is considered to be a win-win technique and one that PMI feels should most often be used by project managers.

In any set of recommendations for handling conflict in a project environment, the following list for conflict resolution facilitators will be helpful.

- Be proactive. Prevent the conflict with good policies, processes, and especially relationships. The best defense is a good offense.
- Attack the problem, not the person.
- Focus on what can be done.
- Encourage effective conversations.
- Accept ownership or responsibility.
- Find the root cause.
- Let each side air its grievances in a controlled atmosphere with no interruptions; give each side an equal turn.
- Be likable and helpful.
- Do not let conflict fester.
- Build consensus if necessary.
- Use a skilled facilitator.
- State your intentions.
- Know to whom you are talking. Know your audience. Know your team!
- Use effective interpersonal communication strategies, including active listening.
- Be congruent in your use of verbals and non-verbals

When possible:

- Use disarming strategies and ask for help; agree with criticism.
- Adapt to the other side's social and communication styles.
- Show empathy for other person's viewpoint.
- Find creative solutions, not fault.
- Be partners: solve the problem while building the relationship.
- Turn orders into requests.
- If you are a leader, do not take over and solve the problem for the group.
- Use effective negotiation strategies for win-win.
- Never compromise your values.
- Use a neutral third party to mediate, if necessary.

Dealing with disruptive team members

- Demonstrate empathy.
- Look for the bridge.
- Clarify intentions.
- Appeal to values or higher motives: the greater good of the group.
- Discuss the situation one-on-one in an effective conversation.
- Find the root cause. Know your receiver's communication styles.
- Use the Basic Feedback model.
- Use active listening.
- Use persuasion and good stories; remember WIIFM (What's in it for me?).
- Only threaten as last resort, unless it is an emergency.

Dealing with Anger

As a result of conflict, three types of anger are often exhibited: controlled, expressed, and irrational. With controlled anger, the employee is friendly but dissatisfied. While they'll listen to reason, they expect solutions. With expressed anger, the employee uses angry terminology ("I'm very angry," or, "I will never deal with you again.") and often demands an apology (and/or compensation) as well as a solution.

With irrational anger, the employee is very emotional and may use obscene language. They totally refuse to listen to reason and refuse to come to an agreeable solution. In extreme situations, the employee may even bring weapons to the workplace. In this situation, it is always best to remove yourself to a place of safety and notify proper authorities as soon as possible.

There is a 3-part model to dealing effectively with anger: 1) **deal with feelings**, 2) **listen**, and 3) **problem solve**. The first step requires that you satisfy the person's basic need: for his or her opinion to be valued and understood. Don't react emotionally and don't take it personally. As you listen to them, ask open questions and paraphrase what they say. Clarify any information holes and summarize the problem before moving on. Ask them how they would want you to deal with the situation (whether you can accommodate their idea or not). Only after hearing them out can you move on to problem solving. But make sure you find out the real problem, not the symptoms. Offer options for a solution, but try to have the employees themselves come up with the solution as much as possible.

The #1 Issue: Communication

The theme of good listening and communication skills has come up over and over throughout this paper. Your communication skills are the key! As the leader, a major part of your effort should be to listen to your staff.

How can you listen better? First, stop talking. Concentrate on what is being said and don't argue mentally or plan your next comment. Watch your body language, and make sure you put the speaker at ease and react appropriately (empathy, nod, eye contact). Do not stop listening until they stop talking. Avoid making assumptions, and listen for main points and supportive evidence. Remember, you share responsibility for the success – or failure – of the communication.

A useful tool for giving your fellow employees feedback is the **basic feedback model**. First, you describe a specific behavior that can be objectively verified by others (so it is not just your opinion), then you list its impact on you or the group. Then make a request to see what can be done to solve the problem. Always remember during the feedback process that active listening skills are very useful.

1. Behavior description:
 - "When you said (say)..."
 - "When you did (do)..."
2. Feelings (optional):
 - "I felt (feel)..."
3. Impact:
 - "As a result ..."
4. Request:
 - "Can we discuss it?"
 - "What can we do to resolve this?"
 - "Was that your intention?"

Summary

Conflict is often inevitable, but can be managed by the best communicators. The key is to keep it from escalating and becoming disruptive. There are various types of conflict and various ways to manage it, but the best methods usually involve collaboration and, above all, increased communication.

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