

Resolving Conflict: A Project Management (PM) Practitioner's Job #1

INTRODUCTION

Conflict is a part of life. People will always have differences. In the workplace, people can disagree over anything, such as policies, decisions, ideas, and strategies.

Conflict is not always bad. When it is addressed and resolved, conflict often leads to positive changes, increased productivity, better decisions, innovation, and bonding among people. Adversely, unresolved conflict can lead to poor productivity, low morale, distrust, and failure. A PM practitioner must know how to handle conflict.

DEFINITIONS

Conflict:

- What you get when two or more people have differences, real or perceived, that are not resolved.

Conflict Resolution:

- What we do to identify and address conflict in a mature and respectful way.

TYPES OF CONFLICT

Conflict may occur for four reasons:

1. **Contentious Personalities.** A person's disposition or personality is a complex and complicated matter; parenting, culture, community, experiences, and other outside influences determine how an individual is shaped. Sometimes, individuals simply do not like each other and clash. The following personalities can be categorized as annoying, bothersome, or difficult to work with:
 - a. A "know-it-all"
 - b. An argumentative individual
 - c. A "people pleaser"
 - d. A narcissist (ego-maniac)
 - e. A self-loather
2. **Misunderstanding.** Keep in mind that many conflicts may just be misunderstandings. Due to perceptions, you may find that one or more of the parties involved do not have all the facts about the situation. Once everyone knows the facts, the misunderstanding disappears.

3. **Issues.** Perhaps stakeholders' opinions, objectives, or preferences about a situation differ, or they have different expectations. A multitude of issues can arise between individuals that easily halt a working relationship and alter the social atmosphere of any group.
4. **Styles of Leadership.** Every PM practitioner has a particular way he or she leads. Every stakeholder, team member, or follower preferentially responds to a particular method of leadership. Leaders can conflict with team members, just as much as project managers can conflict with other PM practitioners due to their style of leadership. Differing leadership styles can create conflict for any individual or group.

Here are four styles of leadership:

- a. Authoritarian
- b. Democratic
- c. Charismatic
- d. Passive

METHODS FOR RESOLVING CONFLICT

Do not let a conflict between team members degenerate into refusals to communicate or work with one another, name-calling, or even worse. Remind team members that they are not required to like each other, but you do expect them to put aside their personal differences and focus on achieving the team's goal. If a conflict does indeed exist, there are a number of ways to approach it:

1. **Ignore it.** In some situations, the issue may not be important and it may be best to ignore it. Often, though, this method does not work. The conflict does not go away; it often festers.
2. **Smooth it over.** This method is appropriate when the issues are more important to the parties involved than they are to you and the team's goals. This method preserves harmony and goodwill.
3. **Force.** A leader uses power to resolve differences. This method is best used when an emergency requires a quick decision. However, it usually results in "winners" and "losers," and losers can be resentful.
4. **Compromise.** Each party makes a major concession to arrive at a solution. Since both parties lose something, they may have less support for the compromise solution.
5. **Collaboration.** This is a good way to resolve conflict. Each side recognizes the other's needs as legitimate and important and acknowledges their ability and expertise. They work together to arrive at an agreement that will resolve the conflict. When each party wins, they have greater commitment to the solution and no resentment or distrust.

Adapted from, *"Resolving Conflict, The Leadership Series, TMI, Where Leaders are Made"*

FACILITATE COLLABORATION

Collaboration offers a framework that will result in a win-win situation. You can facilitate the collaboration process by following these seven steps:

1. **Find the root cause.** Sometimes symptoms can mask the real problem or issue. Your goal is to find the root cause. Keep the discussion focused, and do not let it digress. Once the issues have been determined, focus on solutions not blame.
2. **Allow all parties to speak.** In any effort to resolve conflict, open communication is important. Allow all parties to express their views uninterrupted. You also have the opportunity to discuss how the conflict is:
 - a. Affecting team members' performance
 - b. Preventing the team from achieving its goals

A Word of Caution

Since emotions often intensify in a conflict situation, do not allow them to consume the parties involved. Keep a respectful, empathetic, and caring attitude toward everyone. Do not let the discussion dissolve into accusations and blame or debates about who is right or wrong.

3. **Encourage all parties to listen.** As stakeholders (interested parties) / team members air their views and ideas, encourage them to listen intently to one another. Ask questions if needed. By listening, the position of each party will be made known, which will help in the efforts to resolve the conflict.
4. **Identify areas of disagreement.** Help both parties determine their key differences and discuss them to find the real issue or problem. Previous disagreements and behaviours should not be brought up. Limit the discussion to the facts and what is happening now in the present situation.
5. **Identify areas of agreement.** Once everyone has spoken, help them find and discuss areas they agree on, such as:
 - a. Common goals
 - b. Interests
 - c. Values
6. Search for solutions. Everyone works together to develop a list of possible solutions.
7. Reach a consensus, by:
 - a. Reviewing the list of possible solutions
 - b. Evaluating each suggestion
 - c. Reaching a consensus on the best one

CONCLUSION

Whenever people are working together closely, conflict will occur. Differences in perspective, skill, knowledge levels, goals, communication styles, and expectations all can create conflict. View conflict as an opportunity to solve team problems and keep everyone focused on team goals. Use your leadership skills to make sure the discussion focuses on issues and the search for solutions that will be acceptable to everyone. When everyone wins, the team will be able to focus on its work and achieve its goals. A project management practitioner must resolve conflict.

Adapted from, "Resolving Conflict, The Leadership Series, TMI, Where Leaders are Made"