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Conflict Management in Teams

Successful teams have three things in common: (1) they meet their performance goals, (2) their members feel satisfied that they are learning/benefiting from being a part of the team, and (3) the process the team uses to collaborate sets it up for future success.[1] Recent research, however, suggests that in as little as five weeks of working together, only about 25% of teams meet these criteria.[2] The rest of the teams typically experience less-than-ideal processes and a decline in performance and/or satisfaction.

So what goes wrong? Most team members report that conflict among team members gets in the way of effective teamwork, and this conclusion is largely supported by academic research. The effect of conflict on teams is not always straightforward, however. Under the right conditions, for example, conflict can stimulate divergent thinking and lead to improved problem solving. On the other hand, it also tends to increase defensiveness, distract members from effective problem solving, and generate interpersonal animosity. So what determines whether a team can harness the benefits and limit the liabilities of conflict?

More than a decade of research provides a clear answer: how team conflict is _managed_. Because conflict happens in all teams (even the most effective ones), the presence of conflict has little bearing on whether one team is more successful than another. The factor most important to team success is how teams handle conflict when it does arise—and there are clear and reliable patterns associated with (in)effective conflict management. These patterns center on a critical tradeoff that teams implicitly or explicitly make when deciding how to deal with their conflict: the tradeoff between getting work done and making individual members happy.

The most effective teams create strategies to do both, but the majority of teams sacrifice one or the other. For example, conflict gets in the way of effective work if the team is unable or unwilling to address the root cause of the conflict. Low-performing teams typically struggle with this (usually because people did not speak their minds) or are unwilling to address the problem (e.g., when there were politics around taking sides or people are just too fed up to even try). This ultimately hurts performance because the inhibiting factors of the conflict are never managed—that is, removed from the team's process. In terms of individual satisfaction with the team, the distinguishing factor is how proactive versus reactive the team's approach is to conflict management. Teams that are proactive in identifying conflicts and addressing them before they escalate have more satisfied members. Teams that operate in reactive mode, wherein conflicts take them by surprise or keep the team in constant firefighting mode have less satisfied members. These tradeoffs around performance and satisfaction are summarized in **Figure 1** below.

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[1] J. Richard Hackman and Charles G. Morris, "Group Tasks, Group Interaction Process, and Group Performance Effectiveness: A Review and Proposed Integration," in Leonard Berkowitz, ed., _Advances in Experimental Social Psychology_, vol. 8 (New York: Academic Press, 1975).
[2] This article is a summary of the research presented in: Kristin Behfar, Randall Peterson, Elizabeth Mannix, and William Trochim, "The Critical Role of Conflict Resolution in Teams: A Close Look at the Links Between Conflict Type, Conflict Management Strategies, and Team Outcomes," _Journal of Applied Psychology_ 93, no. 1 (2008).

Figure 1. Patterns in teams' outcomes according to the processes they create to manage conflict.

	High/Improving Performance Team is able and willing to identify and correct problems	**Low/Declining Performance** Team is unable or unwilling to identify and correct problems
High/Improving Satisfaction Proactive conflict-resolution strategies planned to preempt negative effects of conflict	**Quadrant 1: The Ideal Team** These teams create processes to foresee or anticipate conflict, allowing the team to either quickly resolve or prevent the conflict from escalating when it does occur. Example description: "*We don't always agree, and if we don't, everyone understands why—and what their part might be in the problem. If someone is upset, we remind ourselves to focus on what (not who) might be causing the problem. We get the right person in the right role, and if someone is having trouble meeting a deadline, they let us know as soon as possible. We feel pretty good about helping one another out where needed.*"	**Quadrant 2: Feeling Good, Doing Bad** These teams create processes that are proactive about protecting relationships to the detriment of tackling the source of the problem. As a result, members feel valued and interactions tend to be pleasant, but the team is not willing to tackle difficult conflict in discussions and usually miss opportunities to leverage members' unique expertise or viewpoints. Example description: "*Open disagreement is rare. We tend to incorporate everyone's viewpoint into our decisions. If we can't reach consensus, we just postpone the decision. This is not always the best, but everyone likes one another.*"
Low/Declining Satisfaction Reactive resolution strategies applied in reaction to existing problems	**Quadrant 3: Recovering via Structure** These teams create processes that reflect learning from their conflicts. Their strategies tend to rely on rules and structured agreements to prevent a similar problem from happening again. This makes team members more reliable (it acts as a substitute for trust), but decreases satisfaction by constraining interactions. Example description: "*Working in my team takes some effort. We have had some big differences. Now, when we have a problem, we force ourselves to stop and have these (sometimes time-consuming and uncomfortable) conversations about what each person can do so this won't happen again. We try to focus on the fact that we all want to do good work.*"	**Quadrant 4: Minimize Misery/Avoidant** These teams describe chaotic/trial-and-error processes that have no clear identification of the root cause of the conflict. Their overall orientation is typically to use strategies that move past (rather than address) the conflict. Example description: "*When we have conflict, we get frustrated fast because big problems just never go away—they keep happening. Our conversations start tense and often escalate; people get upset and take sides. Many times we just give up and vote. The people who lose the vote just have to deal with it. We try to get most of our work done outside of our meetings and keep meetings short.*"

Data source: Excerpted from Behfar et al.

It is probably safe to say that very few teams *want* to be in Quadrants 2 through 4. Teams land there because they do not successfully manage the tension between leveraging individuals' strengths and addressing their complaints. Put another way, in conflict situations, there are competing interests: what is good for the team is not always what each individual wants or is willing to do. In general, higher-performing teams create conflict-resolution strategies that make it clear how individuals need to contribute to the team and how that contribution aligns with their interests, whereas lower-performing teams focus more on appeasing individuals and addressing idiosyncrasies.

We will next discuss unique differences in how teams in the four quadrants manage conflict. It is important to note that people tend to use the same words (e.g., discussion, compromise, consensus) to describe conflict-resolution strategies, but research has demonstrated that those words represent strikingly different processes, as summarized in **Figure 2**.

Figure 2. Summary of conflict-resolution strategies used by teams in each quadrant
and examples of how the same words can represent different resolution processes.

	High/Improving Performance Conflict-resolution strategies focus on the group goal over specific individual complaints/quirks	**Low/Declining Performance** Conflict-resolution strategies focus on specific individuals' complaints over the group goal
High/Improving Satisfaction Proactive conflict-resolution strategies planned to preempt negative effects of conflict	**Quadrant 1: The Ideal Team** *Resolution Focus: Equity* Summary of strategies: • Work assignments based on skill and relevance to team performance • Forecasting scheduling and workload problems • Securing solid understanding behind compromises • Focusing on content over delivery style The process behind the words: *Discussion or Communicating*: Evidence-driven exchange of conflicting views; members focus on evidence and analysis to make decisions *Compromise*: Each person understands how his/her interests align with the team goal—or what he/she is giving up and what he/she is getting back in return *Consensus*: All members are convinced they have compromised for good reasons	**Quadrant 2: Feeling Good, Doing Bad** *Resolution Focus: Equality* Summary of strategies: • Work assignments based on individual interest and/or on who volunteers • In place of analysis, include all ideas • Strong focus on individuals goals, feelings, and needs versus how they can best contribute to team performance The process behind the words: *Discussion or Communicating*: The topic has been raised and talked about (usually amicably) in a team meeting *Compromise*: The team has spent time trying to figure out how to make each person happy *Consensus*: All ideas have been incorporated (rather than debated to select the best one) and/or no one has voiced disagreement
Low/Declining Satisfaction Reactive resolution strategies applied in reaction to existing problems	**Quadrant 3: Recovering via Structure** *Resolution Focus: Enforced Equity* Summary of strategies: • Work assignments by assigned team role or convenience (due to others' uncompleted work) • Written or clearly articulated rules and consequences for not upholding expectations • Majority rule under time pressure • Putting disruptive members into a specific role The process behind the words: *Discussion or Communicating*: Members explicitly discuss conflicts and agree not to let differences get in the way of success *Compromise*: Members agree to follow team rules to prevent further disruption or to follow the majority opinion if under time constraints *Consensus*: Members share responsibility for correcting problems and agree to uphold team expectations	**Quadrant 4: Minimize Misery/Avoidant** *Resolution Focus: Ad Hoc* Summary of strategies: • Work assignments to divide and conquer; avoid meetings and one another • Frustrated members avoid debate and choose the path of least resistance or the easiest solution • Put conflicting viewpoints to a majority vote • Trial and error to correct process The process behind the words: *Discussion or Communicating*: Members openly air complaints and their (usually angry) expression is returned with an equally frustrated, in-kind reaction *Compromise*: Members agree to try a different method, assign a new person to a role, or one person has volunteered to do more work to avoid working with another member *Consensus*: Members have "given in" to a dominant member, they have agreed to disagree, and/or there has been a majority vote

Data source: Excerpted from Behfar et al.

Quadrant 1: The Ideal Team

The teams in this quadrant orient themselves to resolve conflict using the principle of *equity*—each member is asked to contribute his or her fair share only in ways that serve the team. This means that not everyone equally gets what he or she wants, but members usually understand why team decisions are fair and equitable. The strategies unique to these teams include:

- *Having explicit discussions about what members want to do versus what the team needs each person to do.* Quadrant 1 teams are the only teams that actually divide work based on expertise rather than personal interests, convenience, or deadline emergencies. If one team member, for example, wants more client contact but other team members have better qualifications, these teams talk about how to balance individual needs for advancement with the team's need to best serve the client. These proactive discussions also allow them to avoid the critical mistake of debating the legitimacy of personal excuses (e.g., telling a member he or she is wrong to have personal priorities). By foreseeing where individual and team interests might conflict and allocating work accordingly, the likelihood of team members failing to meet expectations, exhibiting passive-aggressive behavior, and offering up excuses that irritate others diminishes.

- *Proactively forecasting preventable problems.* Most teams have busy people on them, which means (even with the best forecasting) they occasionally will miss a deadline or need help. Ideal teams are disciplined about foreseeing periods of work overload for each member and identifying workflow bottlenecks in advance. Being proactive about these issues prevents significant disruptions (e.g., from missed deadlines or delays), makes it easier for members to manage their time, and allows the team to agree on how to communicate about pending problems and change staffing arrangements or secure more resources if needed.

- *Taking time to discuss individuals' compromises.* The two practices above are often difficult because they require direct confrontation: telling a member he or she is not the best person for the job or selecting one person's idea over another's. The time spent to proactively discuss individual disappointments and to secure solid understanding behind compromises, pays off in the longer term because it is makes clear what each person is getting versus giving the team, that each person is valued (even if others consider him/her to be wrong), and why decisions benefit everyone in some way. This often includes the practice of debriefing previous decisions after getting feedback to confirm or disconfirm team wisdom.

- *During conflict, focusing on content over delivery.* When these teams have unanticipated conflicts, they "fight" by focusing on the *content* of the complaint—not the delivery. They do not react to demands and sarcastic or condescending tones, and instead focus on uncovering the underlying causes of the conflict.[3] One way they do this is to diffuse offensive behavior by naming it (e.g., "You are being way too aggressive right now, but I like what you are saying.") They also avoid the mistake of trying to change things about other members (e.g., a domineering member's personality) and instead find a way to get a disruptive member into a role that benefits the team. They might, for example, put an unbearably critical member in charge of reviewing all outgoing work in order to find errors.

These teams are examples of textbook "ideal" collaboration, but that does not mean they do not experience difficult conflict. In fact, great teams typically have *all of the same types and severity* of conflict that other teams have. Where they are better able to contain any negative effects is by using equity as an underlying principle when managing conflict. Equitable resolution helps to maintain or restore a sense of fairness, ensure optimal

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[3] This is a similar practice that is described in negotiation as focusing on interests over positions (e.g., as described in Roger Fisher, William Ury, and Bruce Patton, *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In* (New York: Penguin Group, 1981).

resource allocation, and promote productivity and positive relationships between team members. The benefits of this orientation build over time. As each conflict is encountered and navigated successfully, team members bring these positive memories, behaviors, and expectations with them to the next conflict. Team members can be more willing to contribute and more willing to engage in the next conflict-resolution opportunity.

Not using these techniques, in contrast, can result in behavior that detracts from team performance and/or satisfaction, as seen in the other quadrants.

Quadrant 2: Feeling Good, Doing Bad

Teams in Quadrant 2 orient themselves to resolve conflict using the principle of *equality*—or giving equal weight to every individual and his/her interest. This focus on equality among individuals creates a team norm that values consensus and harmony at the cost of decision quality. For example, these teams consider themselves proactive because their discussions identify what it will take to keep each person positive and engaged in the team. This is indeed a good practice, but only when aligned with what the team is trying to achieve. When making decisions, these teams tend to find ways to equally include everyone's ideas rather than having evidence-driven, analytical discussions. These teams are not as common in organizations as (or are shorter-lived than) teams in the other quadrants because they do not perform. When they do occur, they often consist of members who have large status differences (and the lower-status members are afraid or unwilling to challenge higher-status members), or when there are other political reasons that silence members or make them unwilling to question the wisdom of team decisions.

Quadrant 3: Recovering via Structure

Teams in Quadrant 3 orient themselves to resolve conflict with *enforced equity*. Unlike the teams in Quadrant 1, which also use the principle of *equity*, Quadrant 3 teams are more reactive in dealing with conflicts that have escalated and disrupted team progress. These teams quickly learn from and address their conflicts, which is why they are able to prevent problems from reoccurring. Having to retroactively fix team problems tends to decrease satisfaction because it places team members in the position of having to do more for the team than expected— or having to play a role they would not otherwise have to if other members had upheld their responsibilities. These teams' strategies typically revolve around how to restore and enforce equity. For example, they often create rules, explicit agreements, and clear expectations about how to force members into playing an appropriate part. They consider these strategies ways to make members more reliable, and use them as substitutes for trusting one another to live up to their obligations. Examples of these agreements are picking up unfinished work, agreeing to vote when the team is out of time, or creating new roles that are better suited to each member and/or to isolate disruptive members. These strategies are similar to the ones employed in Quadrant 1, but they are put into place *after* there is a problem. This decreases satisfaction because the balance of individual versus team interests tips toward team interests. For example, members on the losing side of the vote tend to feel marginalized and do not fully understand why their ideas are compromised in favor of the winning course of action. These teams tend to work *around* conflicts and prioritize group output first, which has the effect of improving performance at the expense of individual needs.

Quadrant 4: Minimize Misery/Avoidant

Teams in this quadrant tend to have an unorganized or ad hoc approach to managing their conflict. They not only fail to balance individual versus team interests, they actually fail to address either one. Their strategies focus more on immediate complaints rather than underlying interests. For example, team members make the

mistake of arguing about one another's intentions rather than figuring out how to leverage strengths, they openly tell disruptive members to change a trait or habit rather than figuring out how to minimize a disruptive member's effect on the team, and often get caught in a distracting negative spiral of interpersonal conflict rather than discussing how to accomplish the team goal. A history of unfocused and unsuccessful conflict attempts and an imbalance of individual and team interests generally limits the willingness and ability of members to engage in good-faith conflict resolution. In fact, when asked the question: *What is going wrong in your team?*, members often cannot pinpoint exactly what is wrong. Over time, a buildup of strong emotions and unsuccessful attempts at resolving conflict can cloud members' ability to recognize the cause of the problem, and therefore what they are reacting to may actually have nothing to do with what got the team off track initially.

When members do try to engage with one another, they often opt for Band-Aid strategies that do not address how the team is structured. For example, if they think their discussion lacks consideration of alternative viewpoints, they might try a formal brainstorming process. This solution can generate new alternatives, but does not contribute to decision quality because the team has a weak foundation for discussing and choosing a solution. As old conflict patterns escalate discussion, instead of employing evidence-driven analysis, these teams tend to organize in ways that minimize interaction (e.g., creating subgroups or becoming a de facto virtual team), they choose the easiest solution (e.g., giving in to the dominant voice), or to just rely on voting and majority rule. There is a tit-for-tat mentality rather than a process for sharing responsibilities, knowledge, and work; this leaves members guessing and reacting rather than collaborating and problem solving. These teams usually experience high turnover and require significant outside intervention to recover.

Sustaining a high-performing, highly satisfied team takes a great deal of maintenance and awareness. Over the lifespan of a team, it is highly likely that it will cycle through several or all the quadrants. Understanding the effect that different orientations toward conflict-management strategies have on a team's viability is important because it helps a team recognize where there are imbalances that create negative processes and interactions—and where to focus resources to prevent or reverse the negative effects.