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How to Manage Conflict in Virtual Teams

by Keith Ferrazzi | 10:00 AM November 19, 2012

Employee conflicts can be poisonous. We have all experienced the damage to productivity, crushed creativity, and squashed morale. As Kevin M. Campbell, Accenture's Group Chief Executive, Technology, notes, "All too often, I've seen that personal conflicts derail costly projects and important initiatives." Unresolved employee conflicts are bad enough in a traditional, physical workplace. They are all the more dangerous in a virtual environment, where people don't have the luxury of proximity to work their differences out face-to-face.

I'm not saying that companies should completely avoid employee conflicts. Quite the contrary. I see conflict avoidance as one of the most corrosive attributes of many company cultures (http://blogs.hbr.org/cs/2012/07/conflict_keeps_teams_at_the_to.html). I've always felt, and our research proves, that well-managed conflicts can increase trust, respect, and intimacy among employees within and across teams. The trick is in understanding the basic nature of workplace conflicts. Having studied the topic for years and having conducted hundreds of interventions with corporate teams, I have learned the following key things.

First, some workplace conflicts are interpersonal, and others are task related (<http://psycnet.apa.org/journals/apl/88/4/741/>). Relationship conflicts are often difficult to resolve and they can lead to avoidance instead of an honest effort to work things out. Consider that a common reason why people quit their jobs is because they can't get along with their bosses. Task conflicts, on the other hand, tend to be more straightforward to resolve and can lead to better ways of doing things. In addition, there's an entire set of conflicts that are absolutely healthy for structural and organizational reasons, like competition for limited resources or natural checks and balances when certain jobs have specific authority over others.

Second, when it comes to workplace conflicts, the virtual environment is a double-edged sword. The good news is that bad relationship conflicts don't occur as often because virtual team members are typically focused more on their work and less on interpersonal issues and office politics. Hence, "bad blood" is less likely to develop between co-workers. But the bad news is that, because of the lack of face-to-face contact, which helps to accelerate empathy, task-related disputes can more quickly devolve into relationship conflicts. Most of us can recount a past experience in which a series of testy e-mails quickly turned a valid work disagreement into a personal grudge. For various reasons, people often behave with far less restraint in a virtual environment than in the physical world — a phenomenon that psychologists call the "online disinhibition effect" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Online_disinhibition_effect).

So the question for those who work in a virtual environment is this: How do you keep task-related conflicts from getting personal? I particularly liked the work of Ann Majchrzak (<http://www.marshall.usc.edu/faculty/directory/majchrza>), professor at the University of Southern California Marshall School of Business. Majchrzak has studied virtual projects at numerous companies (<http://www.mendeley.com/research/leading-virtual-teams-2/>), including EDS, IBM, Kraft, Motorola, Shell Chemicals, and Unilever, and has found that successful teams tend to use one important tool: an online

discussion board in a shared virtual workspace. There are several advantages in doing so:

1. Problems don't fester. In a traditional team that's co-located, people often wait for the next meeting to discuss important issues. But that just slows the process, allowing problems to fester. Virtual teams that use online discussion boards can nip problems in the bud by raising an issue whenever it first arises.
2. People can properly vet an issue. Team members can study an issue when they have the time and then offer their input, and they can comment on others' suggestions online so that every proposed solution gets properly vetted. Moreover, team members can be encouraged to contribute and comment on all aspects of a project, not just the parts that might concern their specific area of expertise. As past research has shown, the best solution for a problem often comes from an unexpected source (<http://orgsci.journal.informs.org/content/early/2010/02/22/orsc.1090.0491.abstract>).
3. Teams can avoid false consensus. People will often agree with others because of peer pressure or because they fear being tagged as a naysayer or someone who's not a team player. Those feelings can prevent frank feedback when a difficult issue is being discussed in a traditional physical meeting. But in an online forum, people will be much more likely to voice any pushback, particularly if such comments can be submitted anonymously.
4. The cream will rise to the top. If managed properly, the discussion board will elicit honest feedback from a variety of perspectives, and that filtering process will help discard bad ideas.
5. Transparency builds trust. When issues are discussed openly and resolved based on their technical merits (and not on biases, bad information, or politics), that transparency will engender a sense of fair play, leading to an atmosphere of trust within the team.
6. The online board becomes a natural repository. If there's any question about exactly what was decided (and the reasons for that decision), team members can easily find that information on the online board or elsewhere in the shared virtual workspace.

Such benefits, though, can only be obtained by pro-actively managing the online discussion board in certain ways. Otherwise, it will likely become just another task that team members always find themselves too busy for. To avoid that, here are some best practices:

Create a virtual site as the team's primary focal point. Virtual teams need a shared workspace (<http://hbr.org/product/can-absence-make-a-team-grow-stronger/an/R0405J-PDF-ENG>) — specifically an intranet Web site — as the center for their activities. The workspace should contain shared files, project updates, and information on the various team members, as well as online discussion threads organized by topics. Managers can encourage active participation in the virtual workspace by regularly posting important information and documents there, even the group's critical-path schedule of activities.

Always use the virtual workspace for important issues. Managers must be firm about establishing the virtual workspace as the forum for important task-related issues. Here, the tone is definitely set from the top. Whenever one manager received e-mails that raised important task issues affecting the entire group, he would post them with his responses in the virtual workspace. Soon enough, everyone got the point: If it's important and concerns everyone's work on the project, it gets discussed in the shared workspace.

Protect the privacy of the team. To encourage candor, teams can use a variety of measures for privacy protection (<http://www.mendeley.com/research/factors-influencing-organizational-knowledge-transfer-implication-corporate-performance/>). Some allow only team members (and not their bosses) access to secure areas of the virtual workspace, such as the online discussion board. Others allow sub-groups to create private folders to discuss problems until those issues are ready to be presented to the team as a whole. And still others might allow team members to have private conversations about task-related conflicts through IM, but those individuals are encouraged to later post relevant team information from that discussion.

Assign a "point person" for a particular issue. When a problem arises, someone has to be the point person responsible for seeing that issue through to its resolution. That individual needs to keep track of the discussion thread, solicit everyone's feedback, and, after people have had a sufficient time to contribute, summarize the various arguments. The issue is then submitted as an agenda item for an upcoming meeting. The point person

could be the team leader, the individual who raised the issue, a volunteer, or someone else.

Diverge then converge. Electronic boards should be used for tapping into a variety of perspectives and expertise — what Majchrzak refers to as “idea divergence.” Then, after all the pros and cons of an issue have been summarized by the point person, the team can meet via teleconference to select a course of action — Majchrzak calls this “idea convergence.” During this meeting, an electronic whiteboard can be used to take notes so that any misinterpretations and errors can be corrected in real time — someone saying, “That’s not what I meant. The point I was trying to make is that...” Also, tools like electronic polling can be used to determine whether an issue needs further discussion or is ready for a vote. This helps avoid false consensus and encourages issues to be settled based on the merits of the arguments.

Of course, traditional co-located teams can also use online discussion boards and shared virtual workspaces to help resolve their task-related conflicts, enabling them to take better advantage of the time between physical meetings. But the sad truth is that, for whatever reason, many don’t. Majchrzak recalls a team in her research that had great success using virtual tools like online forums. But then, after the study, the team went back to the old, traditional ways of doing things. As Majchrzak discovered, online discussion boards and shared virtual workspaces can be highly effective but require an active commitment from the entire team — something that is not always easily obtainable. The potential alternative, though, is far from desirable: mismanaged employee conflicts that disrupt the workplace and result in missed deadlines and failed projects.