Managing Conflict in Multidisciplinary Teams

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Multidisciplinary teams often involve conflict. Sometimes the conflict is actually "controversy," that is, disagreement over ideas, theories, opinions, attitudes, etc. where the parties are committed to reaching an agreement and have an common overriding goal. Often, however, the conflict is a "conflict of interest" over scarce (or seemingly scarce) resources where there appear to be irreconcilable differences.   Controversy and conflicts of interest are the two most common forms of interpersonal conflict that occur in multidisciplinary teams. Many students have had negative experiences with conflict and generally tend to avoid it. For conflict to follow a constructive path rather than a destructive one, students need to develop an appreciation for the value of conflict and a set of skills for constructively managing it. Faculty must also be co-oriented to the value of conflict, help students gain the necessary skills, and provide effective classroom procedures to ensure that conflicts follow a constructive path.

Importance of Conflict

The presence of conflict, especially intellectual controversy, is essential for effective group performance. The absence of controversy is a sign of apathy or a norm of concurrence seeking (described as "Groupthink" by Irving Janis) where members are nice and don't disagree. Janis (1972) and Janis and Mann (1977) described several symptoms of groupthink, organized into three categories – overestimation of the group, closed mindedness, and pressures toward uniformity:

Overestimation of the Group
- Illusion of invulnerability
- Belief in group morality

Closed Mindedness
- Rationalization
- Stereotyping Outgroups

Pressures Toward Uniformity
- Self-censorship
- Direct pressure
- Mindguards
- Illusion of unanimity

The Groupthink video (1995) illustrates these symptoms with scenes from the HBO documentary of the Challenger disaster and other historical events such as the Bay of Pigs invasion and Pearl Harbor. The video provides compelling and dramatic evidence for the consequences of avoiding conflict. The painful silence following the question "Does anyone have a different view?" at the NASA-Morton Thiokol telecom leaves a vivid image of the power of the "pressure toward uniformity." After viewing the video students are typically able to come up with examples of these symptoms of groupthink in their own group experiences.

Alfred P. Sloan, former chair of General Motors, understood the value of conflict as indicated by the following quote:

I take it we are all in complete agreement on the decision here. . .Then I propose we postpone further discussion until our next meeting to give ourselves time to develop disagreement and perhaps gain some understanding of what the decision is all about.

Conflict Avoidance

Why is conflict so often avoided in groups, and why when it occurs does it so often lead to destructive outcomes? One reason seems to be students' perceptions of and attitudes toward conflict. In my project management classes, I ask students to construct an "association map" around conflict. I ask them to draw an ellipse in the center of a blank sheet of paper, write the work "conflict" in the ellipse, and then as quickly as possible jot down every word and phrase they associate with the word "conflict." After about three minutes I ask them to count the total number of associations and to place each into one of three categories – positive, negative, and neutral. Finally I ask them to determine the proportion that are positive. I've done this survey probably 20 times and typically the students report that fewer than 10% of the associations are positive. Perhaps this low proportion of positive associations is because I teach in the upper Midwest (where Minnesota-nice prevails) but perhaps the negative associations of conflict are more pervasive.

Not only do many students avoid conflict, but more importantly, many do not have a set of strategies for dealing with conflict. Students lack of familiarity with effective conflict models also contributes to the avoidance of conflict, and when it does occur, to the increased likelihood of destructive outcomes. One model that I've found very helpful is a dual concern model (goal and relationship) that had its origins with the Blake and Mouton managerial grid (Blake and Mouton, 1964; Blake, Shepherd, & Mouton, 1964).

Conflict Strategies

Johnson & Johnson (1991) created the grid shown in Figure 1 describing five ways for approaching conflict depending on the relative importance of the goal and the relationship. They also created a survey to help individuals recognize their preferred approach to conflict (see Johnson & Johnson, 1995 or Smith, 1999).

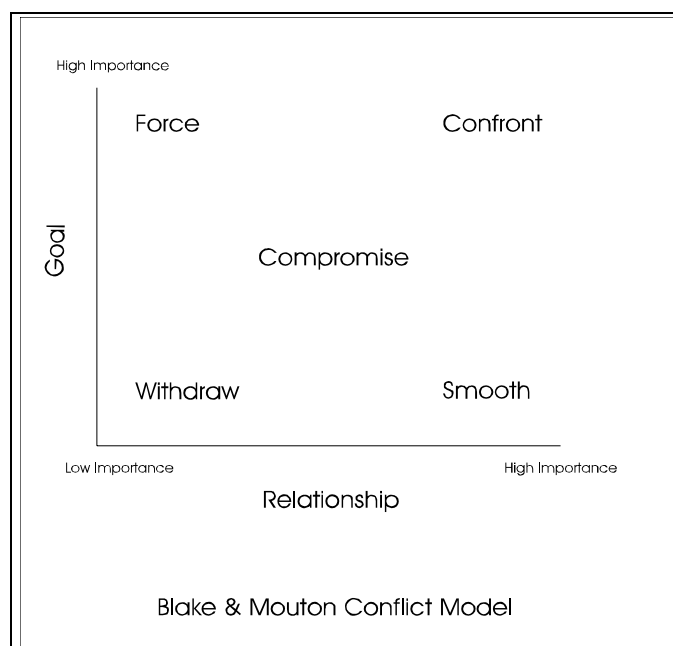An elaboration on each of these strategies is presented below:

Figure 1 Conflict Strategies

Conflict Strategies

Withdrawing	-	Neither the goal nor the relationship are important - you withdraw from the interaction.
Forcing	-	The task is important but not the relationship - use all your energy to get the task done.
Smoothing	-	The relationship is more important than the task. You want to be liked and accepted.
Compromising	-	Both task and relationship are important but there is a lack of time - you <u>both</u> gain and lose something.
Confronting	-	Task and relationship are equally important. You define the conflict as a problem-solving situation and resolve through negotiation.

Each of these strategies is appropriate under certain conditions. For example, if neither the goal nor the relationship is important to you, then often the best thing to do is withdraw! If the relationship is extremely important and the task is not so important (at the time), then smoothing is appropriate. Effective team members, and especially effective team leaders are more likely to use smoothing and confronting than withdrawing and forcing in their routine dealing with conflict situations.

Confrontation and Negotiation
In many conflict situations, both the task and the relationship are important. In these situations, confronting and negotiating often leads to the best outcomes. A **confrontation** is the direct expression of one's view of the conflict and one's feelings about it while inviting the opposition to do the same. Suggested guidelines for confrontation are:
1. Do not "hit-and-run": confront only when there is time to jointly define the conflict and schedule a negotiating session.
2. Openly communicate one's feelings about and perceptions of the issues involved in the conflict, and try to do so in minimally threatening ways.
3. Accurately and fully comprehend opponent's views of the feelings about the conflict.

A successful confrontation sets up an opportunity to negotiate. **Negotiation** is a conflict resolution process by which people who want to come to an agreement, but disagree about the way to resolve, try to work out a settlement. Johnson & Johnson (1995) recommend the following steps in negotiating a conflict:
1. Confront the opposition.
2. Define the conflict mutually.
3. Communicate feelings and positions.
4. Communicate cooperative intentions.
5. Take the other person's perspective.

6.   Coordinate the motivation to negotiate.
7.   Reach an agreement that is satisfactory to both sides.

Constructively resolving conflicts through a confrontation - negotiation process takes time and practice to perfect, but it's worth it. Conflicts that do not get resolved at a personal level must be resolved at more time-consuming and costly levels – third-party mediation, arbitration, and if all else fails, through litigation.

Conflict Heuristics

As mentioned in the introduction, when a conflict arises it is a "moment of truth" and the conflict can take either a destructive path (name calling, shouting insults, put downs) or constructive path (we've got a problem, let's work on it). There are no recipes guaranteeing success in constructively managing conflicts, so in the spirit or Billy Koen's definition of the engineering method (Koen, 1985):

> The engineering method is the use of heuristics to cause the best change in a poorly understood situation within the available resources (p 70).

here are some heuristics for dealing with **conflicts** in long-term personal and professional relationships, such as engineering teams both inside and outside the classroom:
1.   Do not withdraw from or ignore the conflict.
2.   Do not engage in "win-lose" negotiations.
3.   Assess for smoothing.
4.   Compromise when time is short.
5.   Confront to begin problem-solving negotiations.
6.   Use your sense of humor.

Remember that heuristics are reasonable, plausible but not guaranteed. I suggest that you develop your own set of heuristics for dealing with conflict as well as for the other skills needed for effective teamwork.

Instructional Strategies for Avoiding Groupthink

Much of this paper was devoted to individual approaches to addressing and resolving conflicts. Most conflicts are personal in nature and are best addressed early and resolved via informal negotiation. There are some structural conditions that may help team members raise controversial issues and help teams deal with conflict more constructively. The Groupthink video (1995) suggested four key strategies for avoiding groupthink:
• Promote an open climate
• Avoid the isolation of the team
• Appoint critical evaluators
• Avoid being too directive

Promoting an open climate can be implemented by having frequent "benchtop reviews," briefings, and intergroup interaction. These features will also help avoid the isolation of the

team.   Appointing critical evaluators can be done by assigning roles or, more extensively, by assigning advocacy subgroups. The constructive controversy formal cooperative learning procedure is one way to operationalize advocacy subgroups (Johnson & Johnson, 1995; Johnson & Johnson, & Smith, 1996). Avoiding being too directive can be facilitated through using a distributed leadership model, again through the assignment of roles that are rotated periodically.

Multidisciplinary teams with diverse membership are essential to successfully formulate and solve the complex, multifaceted problems that we face, and for these teams to be most effective, team members must learn how to constructively manage conflict. Practice with structured controversy, increased understanding of the importance of goals and relationships in conflict situations, and learning about conflict models can all lead to improved conflict management.

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