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MANAGING CONFLICT IN THE TEAM

One of the common problems found in teams is the presence of disruptive conflict and hostility. Feelings of animosity between individuals or between cliques or subgroups may grow to such proportions that people who must work together do not speak to one another at all. All communications, if any, are by memo or e-mail, even though offices are adjoining. Why do such conflicts occur, and how can a team resolve such differences?

In this chapter, we explore the basis of conflict in teams by discussing expectation theory and its application to teams. We outline the various conflict resolution methods and then focus on what to do when the manager or team leader is the problem, how to manage diversity successfully in a team, and how to deal effectively with a problem team member.

Expectation Theory of Conflict

Probably the most common explanation for understanding conflict is the theory of conflicting personalities. When two people do not get along, it is easiest to say that their "personalities clash." Underlying this explanation is a presumption that one individual's personality (a complex of attitudes, values, feelings, needs, and experiences) is so different from another's that the two cannot function compatibly. However, attributing team conflict to personality clashes is not helpful and in fact often makes things worse, since the only way to resolve the problem would be to get someone to change his or her personality (at a deep level, none of us wants to feel that we have personality flaws that need to be changed; as a result we will be very defensive when our "personality" gets attacked) or be removed from the team. Because personality is so deeply rooted by reached adulthood, it would seem impossible to improve the situation.

A more useful way to understand conflict is to view it as the result of a violation of expectations. Whenever the behavior of one person violates the expectations of another, negative reactions will result. If expectations are not clearly understood and met by individuals who must work together on a team, a cycle of violated expectations may be triggered. Negative feelings can escalate until open expressions of hostility are common, and people try to hurt or punish each other in various ways rather than try to work cooperatively.

Every person comes to a team with a set of expectations about himself or herself, the team leader, and the other team members. Their expectations of others can be described in terms of what is to be done, when it should be done, and how it is to be done. Frequently people may agree on the "what" conditions, but expectations in the other two aspects—expectations about when actions should be taken and how they should be taken—are more often violated.

To illustrate this concept, consider the following example of how violated expectations led to conflict between a newlywed couple (virtually all married people have their own stories of adjustment after they got married).

Ann leaves the apartment for her first day of work after the honeymoon. She can't wait to finish work so that she can rush home to enjoy a quiet and, she hopes, romantic evening with her new husband, John. Because John is a second-year MBA student who finishes class by 3:00 p.m., Ann guesses that he might surprise her by fixing dinner—something he did frequently while they were dating. Before she left, he had asked, "What do you think about spaghetti carbonara for dinner?" a favorite meal that he has made for her before.

At school, John discovers that he has a finance case analysis due tomorrow with his study team. The team decides that the only time they can all meet is from 4:00 to 7:00 p.m. John wants to be home to meet Ann when she returns at 6:30 p.m., so he suggests that the team meet at his apartment. After two hours of work, the case team begins to get tired and hungry. The analysis is more difficult than they expected, and they realize they will need more time. So they decide to order pizza and work until 8:00 p.m. When Ann arrives home, she finds a mess in the kitchen from the pizza and snacks. She also finds a mess in the family room where John's team has strewn papers everywhere. John gives Ann a quick kiss and tells her about the assignment but promises they should be done within an hour or so. He's sorry he can't make dinner for her—but he's saved a slice of pizza for her.

Ann surveys the mess. This is not what she was expecting. Couldn't he have called to warn her? But she decides to clean up the mess and patiently wait for John to finish the assignment. After all, she's brought home John's favorite cheesecake, a surprise she was hoping would be the icing on a quiet, romantic evening together. After an hour, John appears and says, "Sorry, this assignment is a bear; it's probably going to be another half-hour." After another hour, the study team finally leaves. John flops on a chair in the kitchen and says, "I'm exhausted."

Out of the corner of his eye, he spies the cheesecake, grabs a fork, and exclaims, "This is just what I need!" Shortly he is at the table shoveling in the cheesecake when something clicks in his awareness. Something is wrong, he senses. Ann is awfully quiet and is just picking at the piece of cheesecake he pushed in front of her.

"Anything the matter?" he asks. Ann says nothing, eyes fixed on the cheesecake.

Now he knows something is wrong and puts down the fork. "What's the matter, Ann?" he asks with real concern.

Tears start to well up in Ann's eyes as she thinks about the lost evening. John didn't call her to tell her he couldn't make dinner; he didn't clean up after his mess in the kitchen; he didn't thank her for the cheesecake; and worst of all, he hadn't paid her any attention.

"The honeymoon is definitely over," she says angrily. "Thanks for the cold pizza and for letting me clean up your friends' mess."

John is stunned. Where is this anger coming from? Hadn't he arranged to at least be home? Hadn't he at least thought to save her a slice of pizza? Doesn't she realize he needs good grades to get a good job?

"Well, thanks for your patience and support of my graduate work," he replies sarcastically.

And before they know it, Ann and John are embroiled in their first fight as a married couple.

Of course, Ann and John's experience is not unusual. Each had expectations that were violated. From Ann's perspective, husbands should call when plans change, they should pick up after themselves, and they should say "thanks" when their wives surprise them with their favorite dessert. From John's perspective, wives should be more flexible when plans change and patient when their husbands have important work to do, just as husbands should when their wives have important work to do. We see violated expectations leading to conflict all the time in all types of relationships, not only in teams.[1]

The bottom line is that violated expectations lead to conflict when they are not understood, discussed, and resolved. Most individuals, whether in a family or work team, do not knowingly violate the expectations of those with whom they must collaborate. The problem is that many expectations are implicit: we have them, and we may not even know we have the expectation until it is violated. Following are some common expectations that team leaders, subordinates, or peers on a team may violate.

Typical Ways That Team Leaders Violate Subordinates' Expectations

- Micromanaging their work (not giving them any autonomy to make decisions)
- Making decisions that affect the subordinate without asking for his or her input
- Letting some team members shirk their duties without any negative consequences
- Not giving praise or any rewards for a job well done
- Not recognizing that the subordinate has a life outside work that occasionally takes priority over work

Typical Ways That Subordinates Violate Team Leaders' Expectations

- Missing or being late to team meetings
- Not outwardly demonstrating commitment and support for the leader's agenda and priorities
- Not completing assignments in a timely manner so the team can complete its work
- Not letting the leader know when there are problems so that the leader isn't surprised

Typical Ways That Peers Violate Expectations

- Not sharing resources (or competing for resources)
- Not sharing credit for a job well done

- Not responding to voice mails or e-mails in a timely manner

As we have noted, our expectations of ourselves and others are often implicit; they are held but not explicitly stated or understood. By just surfacing the expectation, the conflict may be resolved. Of course, in other cases, resolving conflict requires compromise, the adjustment of expectations of others, or adjustment in behaviors so that expectations are met.

Expectation theory is useful in dealing with conflict because it focuses on clarifying expectations of ourselves and others by identifying specific behaviors that may violate those expectations. If team members can begin to identify the behaviors or actions that violate their expectations, perhaps agreements can be negotiated, so that the end result is greater mutual understanding and fewer conflicts.

Negotiating Agreements

In planning a team-building session to deal with conflicts, certain agreements between the conflicting parties need to be met.

- It helps if people can agree that problems exist, that those problems should be solved, and that all parties have some responsibility to work on the issues.
- All parties must agree to meet and work on the problems.
- People may find it easier to deal with conflict if they can accept the position that the end result of the team-building session is not to get everyone to "like" one another but rather to understand one another and be able to work together. People do not need to form personal friendships, but group members at least should be able to trust one another and meet one another's expectations.

The disagreeing parties will work best together in the team-building session if they can adopt the position that it is not productive to try to unravel who is at fault or what led to the problems. Rather, they should accept the fact that differences exist and that they need to work out agreeable solutions.

Helping Teams in Conflict or Confusion: The Role Clarification Exercise

A particularly useful intervention for determining expectations is what we call the role clarification exercise. The role clarification model of team building is considered appropriate if several of the following conditions are prevalent in the organization or unit that is considering a team-building program:

- The team is newly organized, and no one has a clear understanding about what others do and what others expect of them.
- Changes and reassignments have been made in the team, and there is a lack of clarity about how the various functions and positions now fit together.
- Job descriptions are old and not consistent with current realities.
- Meetings are held infrequently and only for passing on needed directions.
- People carry out their assignments with very little contact with others in the same office. They generally feel isolated.
- Conflicts and interpersonal disruptions in the unit seem to be increasing. Coffee-break talk and other informal communications center on discussion of overlaps and encroachments by others on work assignments. People get requests they don't understand. They hear through the grapevine about what others are doing; it sounds as if

it's something they should know about, but nobody informs them.

- The boss engages primarily in one-on-one management. Team meetings are infrequent or primarily involve listening to the boss raise issues with one individual at a time while others watch and wait for their turn. Almost no problem solving is done as a team or between people. Issues are taken to the boss, and only then are needed people called together.
- People sit in their offices and wonder, "What is happening on this team? I don't know what others are doing, and I'm sure nobody knows [or cares] what I'm doing."
- A crisis occurs because everyone thought someone else was responsible for handling a task that was never completed.

Planning

The following sections describe the steps of a role-clarification team-building exercise. Over the years, we have found this to be one of the most useful exercises for a team to engage in, with generally very positive results.

Time Commitment For a team of eight to ten people, the minimum time needed for this type of team building is approximately one-half hour to one hour for each person, or a total of four to ten hours of meeting time, preferably in a solid block. With a training day from 8:30 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. and 1:00 to 4:30 p.m., this typically could be achieved in one day. It also would be possible to conduct this type of team-building session by taking one afternoon a week over a period of time. Our experience, however, indicates that spending the time in one block has more impact. Each time a group meets, a certain amount of settling-in time is required, which is minimized if only one session is held.

Resource Personnel If the ground rules, procedures, overall goals, and design elements are clear, a manager need not be afraid to conduct this type of meeting with no outside assistance from a consultant or facilitator. If certain realistic concerns suggest that an outside person would be helpful in facilitating the meeting, one could be included. This person may be someone from within the company but in a different department, such as a human resource or organization development specialist or a consultant from outside the company.

Regardless of whether an outside resource person is used, the entire team-building meeting should be conducted and managed by the team leader or boss. Team building is management's business; it is a supervisor building his or her team. It is not an exercise called by a staff person in human resources.

Program Design Goal The goal of a role clarification team-building program is to arrive at that condition in which all members of the team can publicly agree that they:

- Have a clear understanding of the major requirements of their own job
- Feel that the others at the team-building meeting also clearly understand everyone's position and duties
- Know what others expect of them in their working relationships
- Feel that all know what others need from them in their working relationships

All agreements in working relationships should be reached with a spirit of collaboration and a willingness to implement the understandings. Procedures should be established that permit future misunderstandings to be handled in more effective ways.

Preparation This part of the team-building activity can be done prior to the session or done first by each member of the team in private as the team session begins. Each person should prepare answers to the following questions:

1. What do you feel the organization expects you to do in your job? (This may include the formal job description.)
2. What do you actually do in your job? (Describe working activities and point out any discrepancies between your formal job description and your actual job activities.)
3. What do you need to know about other people's jobs that would help you do your work?
4. What do you think others should know about your job that would help them do their work?
5. What do you need others to do in order for you to do your job the way you would like?
6. What do others need you to do that would help them do their work?

Meeting Design

Managing the role clarification meeting is an important role for the team leader or consultant. Following are the goals, ground rules, and steps in role claification.

Goals The goals of the team-building meeting should be presented, clarified, and discussed. Everyone should agree on the goals or hoped-for outcomes of the sessions.

Ground Rules Ground rules should be developed by the team, written on a sheet of paper, and posted for all to see. Some suggested ground rules are as follows:

1. Be as candid and open as possible in a spirit of wanting to help improve the team.

2. If you want to know how another person feels or thinks about an issue, ask that person directly. If you are the person asked, give an honest response, even if it is to say, "I don't feel like responding right now."
3. If the meeting becomes unproductive for you, express this concern to the group.
4. Every member should have an opportunity to speak on every issue.
5. Decisions made should be agreeable to all those who are affected by the decision.

Role Clarification

Each person will have an opportunity to be the focal person and will follow these steps:

1. The focal person describes his or her job as he or she sees it. This means sharing all information about how the focal person understands the job: what is expected, when things are expected to be done, and how they are expected to be done. Other team members have the right to ask questions for clarification.
2. All others indicate that they understand what the focal person's position entails after this person's description: what is to be done, when things are to be done, and how they are to be done.
3. If the focal person and others have differences in expectations about the focal person's job, they should be resolved at this point, so that there is a common agreement about what the focal person's job entails.
4. After agreement has been reached about the nature of the job, the focal person talks directly to each person on the

team, identifying what he or she needs from the other in order to do the job as agreed on.

5. The others then have the opportunity to tell the focal person what they may need in return or what additional help the focal person might need from them so that the focal person can accomplish the demands of the position.

At the end of the role clarification session, it is often important to get feedback about how people are feeling. To get such feedback, team members might be asked to respond to the following questions:

1. How have you felt about the role clarification exercise?
2. What were the best parts for you?
3. What should be changed or improved in the future?
4. Do we need other sessions like this? If so, what should we discuss? When should we meet again?

This type of team development meeting is one of the easiest to manage and one of the most productive of all design possibilities for improving team effectiveness. Most groups of people slip into areas of ambiguity in their working relationships. Expectations about performance develop that people do not understand or even know about. For example, during a role clarification exercise with one company's executive committee, the members of the president's management group were outlining their jobs as they saw them and identifying what they felt they needed from one another in order to carry out their jobs more effectively. When the personnel manager's turn came, she turned to the president and said, "One of the actions I need from you is a chance to get together with you a couple of times a year and review my performance and see what things you feel I need to do to improve."

The president asked in surprise, “Why do you need to get together with me?”

Responded the personnel manager, “When I was hired two years ago, it was my understanding that I was to report directly to you.”

“Nobody ever cleared that with me,” stated the president. “I thought you reported to the executive vice president.”

The personnel manager had been waiting for two years for a chance to get directions and instructions from the person she thought was her direct superior, but that relationship had never been clarified until the role clarification session. Although most work teams do not have misunderstood expectations to this degree, the periodic clarification of roles is useful for any work team.

Another role clarification session we facilitated had a dramatic impact on the team and team leader. During the course of the session, the team members and the team leader—the company CEO—reached an impasse. The CEO believed his role was to make most of the decisions for the team, and the team members' role was mostly to follow his orders. Those on the team, the company vice presidents, reacted strongly against this view: they thought that decisions should be made more by consensus and that the role of the CEO should be to facilitate, not make, team decisions. The role clarification ended without resolution.

After the meeting, the vice presidents met and made a decision: either the CEO would need to rethink his role or they would quit. A few of the vice presidents, as representatives of the team, met with the board of directors, described the role conflicts between them and the CEO, and issued an ultimatum: “Either the CEO goes or we go.” The board decided to “promote” the CEO to serve on the board and appointed one of the vice presidents to serve as the new CEO. As a result, the new management team with new clarity about the role of the CEO began to perform at a much higher level than before.

Although the goal of such a team-building session is not to get the team leader fired or removed, a role clarification session encourages the team to focus on the problems the leader has caused. Thus, the leader can respond in an affirmative way and agree to make some changes or, as in this case, stonewall the team and refuse to negotiate a new set of roles and behaviors. Either way, the exercise forces the team to confront some difficult issues and creates energy for change, which can lead to a more positive outcome for the team. Of course, this case also illustrates the risks involved when clarifying the roles of team members.

The Start-Stop-Continue Exercise

In some cases a team in conflict may not have the time to conduct a role clarification exercise, or it may prefer a team-building session that focuses more on what the team needs to change in order to minimize conflict and improve performance. In these cases we recommend the "start-stop-continue" exercise.

In this team-building exercise, each person lists what the team as a whole needs to (1) start doing, (2) stop doing, and (3) continue doing in order to reduce conflicts and improve performance. This process typically clarifies how each team member expects the team to behave. Starting at the team level is a way to work down to the individual level within the team. This may work well when team conflict is not high and when team conflicts are general in nature and not focused on specific individuals or subgroups. Of course, when there are multiple parties in conflict, be it individuals or subgroups in the team, it can be helpful for each party to build a list for the other. Each person lists the things he or she would like to see the other individual or group start doing, stop doing, and continue doing if expectations are to be met and positive results achieved. The parties then share their lists.

With the lists of things that each party wants from the other on display for all to see, a negotiation session ensues. Subgroup or person A agrees on what it will do in return for a similar behavioral alteration on the part of subgroup or person B. Such agreements should be written up because signing an agreement may increase the commitment to making the change. This process puts the formerly warring factions into a problem-solving situation that requires them to try to work out solutions rather than spend time finding fault or placing blame.

The design of a conflict-reducing meeting can vary widely. It may be desirable to precede the session with a presentation of expectation theory and a description of the negative consequences of continued hostility. Another possibility is to have each team member try to predict what the other team members think about them and what they think the other members want from them. These guesses are often surprisingly accurate and may help in reaching an agreement.

A similar design may also be used to negotiate agreements between individuals. If a manager feels that the thing most divisive on the team is conflict between two people, the two may be brought together for a problem-solving session to begin to work out agreements with each other. If there are disagreements among team members at any point, it is often best to stop and work out a negotiation and come to an agreement.

Negotiation often involves compromise: each party gives up something to receive something of similar value from the other. Too frequently, however, conflicts are handled by people engaging in the following activities:

- *Ignoring*—trying to pretend that no disagreement exists.
- *Smoothing*—trying to placate people and attempting to get them to feel good even though an agreement has not been reached.

- *Forcing*—getting agreement from a position of power. If the more powerful person forces the other to agree, the result may be public agreement but private resistance.

When an effective team experiences conflict, the team takes time to identify the cause of it. The team identifies the conflict as a problem to be solved and takes problem-solving actions.[2] The facilitator (usually team leader) must be perceptive enough to ensure that ignoring, smoothing, or forcing behaviors do not occur during the team-building session. Otherwise the problems will not be resolved and conflict will quickly reemerge.

The Manager as the Center of Conflict

It is rather common to find that the center of conflict is the manager or team leader. Sometimes the problem is between the manager and the whole group and sometimes between the manager and one or two members of the group. In either case, unless the superior is aware of the situation and is willing to take steps to remedy the problem, it is difficult for team members to open up the issue and deal with it. It is also not uncommon for the superior to be totally or partially unaware of the extent of the emotional breach that has occurred. In power relationships, subordinates learn to become quite skilled at masking negative feelings and pretending everything is going well when in fact there are problems. Sometimes feelings are not completely masked, and instead a form of passive-aggressive resistance occurs that the superior may see but not understand.

When any of the major symptoms of team difficulties (as listed in chapter 5) emerge, the team leader should ask, "Is it possible that I am at least partly responsible for these problems?" How does a team leader get an honest answer to this question?

1. *Ask the team members*. Either in a team meeting or in an interview with each of the team members, the team leader might

say something like this: "I want you to level with me. I know that things have not been going well in our team. [He or she then describes some of the symptoms.] I want to know if I am responsible for creating some of these problems. I would appreciate it if you could let me know either openly now or in a memo later what things I am doing that create problems and any suggestions you have that would improve matters."

In asking for feedback, it is often useful if the leader can identify some things that have already come to mind—for example, "I think that I sometimes come to meetings with my mind already made up and then put pressure on people to agree with me; then when I get the forced agreement, I pretend that we have reached a consensus. Do you see this behavior in me? [The leader waits for a response.] If you do, what suggestions do you have that will help me avoid this kind of problem?" If there is a lack of trust in the team or in certain team members, this direct asking may not elicit any real data or at best only hidden messages. This means that the leader may then need to resort to other means of getting data.

2. *Use an outside resource.* A common method of getting information to the leader is to find an outside person, either outside the team but in the organization (usually a human resource or organization development specialist) or an external consultant. A skilled outside resource can interview team members and try to elicit information about the involvement of the team leader in team problems. This information can then be fed back to the leader and a strategy devised for using the information with the team.

3. *Use survey instruments.* Currently a wide variety of survey instruments is available for gathering data, anonymously if necessary, from subordinates about their perceptions of the leader. A human resource person is useful for handling this task and then seeing that the data are summarized and returned to the superior. Then a method for using this information with the team needs

to be devised. A recommended method is for the manager to present a summary of data to the group, indicate acceptance of the data, announce some preliminary actions that will be taken, and ask the team members to suggest other appropriate changes.

4. *Undertake laboratory training.* A method used more often some years back than today is for the manager to go to a training program that features giving feedback to all participants on their interpersonal style. The manager then brings a summary of this feedback to the team, checks with the members about its validity, and works out a program of improvement.

Although the superior wishing to find out if his or her performance is causing conflicts in the team may take a variety of actions, a more difficult issue remains if the leader is unaware of his or her impact or does not seem to want to find out. In such a situation, here are some ways for team members to get data to the leader:

1. *Suggest a role clarification session.* This session could allow the team members to identify actions they need from the team leader or changes they feel would improve activities in the team.

2. *Give direct feedback.* One possibility is for team members to find an opportunity to give direct, albeit unsolicited, feedback to the leader. Despite the inherent risks, the team—either all together or through representatives—could say to the leader, "We have a dilemma. There are problems in the team that we feel involve you. Our dilemma is we think we should share this information with you, but we do not want to disrupt our relationship with you. Do you have any suggestions as to how we might deal with this dilemma?" This approach usually results in the leader's asking for the data in a far different atmosphere than the one that results from confronting the leader unexpectedly with tough feedback.

3. *Use an outside person.* It is possible for the team to go to an appropriate internal resource person and ask for assistance. Often the outside person can then go to the leader and suggest a set of alternative actions or behaviors that will improve team performance.

Diversity as the Source of Conflict

Diversity is another common source of conflict for teams today. Diversity in teams is the result of several forces. More and more, various groups once considered minorities in business (women, African Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans, the aged, and others) are being represented on decision-making teams. Also, businesses are becoming more international to capture foreign markets. This means more multicultural planning and policymaking groups. Factions formerly in adversarial positions are now trying to work together collaboratively: management, labor, government, environmental groups, consumer groups, and the media, among many others. Along with these types of groupings is a wide range of social groupings that may contribute to diversity in teams: age, race, ethnic origin, social status, sexual orientation, education, religion, political affiliation, gender, family status, regional identification, personal style, personal experiences, and so on. All of this means that when any people come together as a team, there is a range of diversity that leaders should recognize as a great strength and not a drawback to effective work. Most of the research on groups that use diversity productively shows that these groups are innovative and creative; members are more sensitive and appreciative of others who are different and have different skills and personal resources.[3]

When diversity is not managed effectively, differences can split people apart, cause endless arguments and bickering, and result in bitter feelings, resentment, and less productive work.

The issue is how to make diversity work in a positive way to capitalize on the richness of difference that is in every team.

When team members have obvious differences, one of their goals should be to achieve a level of constructive controversy. Used in this context, *controversy* is defined as the willingness to explore all sides of every issue. Achieving controversy is therefore a desired goal, not something to avoid. Here are some of the key ingredients for building constructive controversy into the team:

- *Common goals or vision.* If people with diverse backgrounds can all commit themselves to a common set of goals or a shared vision of what they can accomplish together, they may be able to combine their richness of difference in new and more innovative ways. Thus, teams characterized by diversity must spend time coming to agreements about what they want to accomplish together.
- *Diversity as a value.* Team members must understand and accept as a shared value that diversity of background and experience is a positive ingredient. They need to discuss what controversy is and see controversy as the willingness to explore all facets of all issues before any decisions or plans are concluded. People on the team might describe their own differences so others can understand where they are coming from when they express ideas and opinions.
- *Guidelines for work.* Assuming that members of the diverse team have a commitment to common goals and accept diversity as a value, developing a set of guidelines for work is immensely useful. Even a diverse group will have deadlines to meet and goals that need to be achieved. The following guidelines might be helpful:
  - Every team member who has some experience with an issue is expected to share his or her own best thinking on that issue.

  - A team member who agrees or disagrees with another member should share that position with the group.
  - The team might adopt the golden rule of diverse communications: discuss issues with others as you would like them to discuss issues with you, and listen to others as you would like them to listen to you.
  - Before any decision is finalized, the leader or a group member should ask, "Have we heard every idea, suggestion, or argument about this proposal?"
  - Any person who disagrees with another should be able to repeat back to the other person's satisfaction the other's position to make sure that the first person disagrees with what the other person meant, not what was heard.
  - It should be completely accepted that every member of the team is a person of worth and intelligence and that every person's opinions, ideas, and arguments therefore should be listened to with respect.
  - The following might be a team slogan: "Controversy, when discussed in a cooperative context, promotes elaboration of views, the search for new information and ideas, and the integration of apparently opposing positions."
- *Critiquing*. Every team, especially a diverse team, should take the time to critique its own processes and performance. How well has the team followed its own guidelines? What has hindered it from being as creative as possible? Has the team used controversy constructively? What do team members need to do to become a more effective team and use their diversity more productively?

The Problem Member

One of the most common questions we hear is, What do you do when one member of the team continually disrupts the rest of the team? This person may always take a contrary point of view, vote against proposals everyone else supports, take a negative or pessimistic position on everything, and frequently miss meetings or not follow through on assignments.

The obvious question in response is, Why do you keep a person like that on your team? Usually the answer is that this person has some needed skill, that he or she is a long-time employee, or that terminating or transferring someone has a lot of built-in problems. As Bob Lutz, who engineered numerous innovations as president of Chrysler, observed, "Disruptive people can be an asset . . . Some (repeat some) disruptive people are very much worth keeping. They're more asset than cost. They're the irritating grains of sand that, in the case of oysters, every now and then produce a pearl. Disruptive people can precipitate breakthroughs, sometimes by forcing an uncomfortable reexamination of comfortable assumptions."[4] However, Lutz acknowledges that in some cases disruptive people are just plain disruptive, and they have to go.

If a manager or supervisor is trying to build a team and one person won't buy into the process, some method of removing that person from the team (such as transfer, reassignment, or even firing) may be necessary. The following actions have also been found to be successful in some cases:

- *Direct confrontation between the team leader and the problem person.* This may give the supervisor an opportunity to describe clearly the person's problem behaviors and the consequences if such behaviors do not change.
- *Confrontation by the group.* If only the boss deals with the problem person, the conflict may be perceived by that person as just the personal bias of the boss. In such a case, it would be better for the group to deal directly with the problem member collectively in a team meeting. The team members must be descriptive in their feedback, not evaluative (e.g. "Why do you do such stupid things?").

They must describe the problem behaviors and identify the negative consequences of the behaviors—all without punitive, negative evaluations of the individual personally.

- *Special responsibility.* For some difficult people, giving them a special role or responsibility on the team increases their commitment to the team process. The person might be asked to be the team recorder, the agenda builder, or the one to summarize the discussion of issues. One team even rotated the difficult member into the role of acting team leader with the responsibility for a limited time of getting team agreement on the issues at hand.
- *Limited participation.* In some rare cases, it may be necessary to limit the participation of the problem member. One team asked the problem person to attend team meetings, listen to the discussion but not participate in the team discussion, and then have a one-on-one session with the team leader. If the leader felt that the member had some legitimate issues to raise with the team, the leader would present them to the team at the next meeting. This intervention forced the problem team member to listen and take some time to think through his ideas before commenting (this is especially useful for individuals who react quickly and emotionally to arguments and who blurt out their thoughts without listening to others or carefully thinking through what they plan to say). This intervention generally is not a palatable solution in the long run, for it essentially ostracizes the person from the group, but it may have some short-term benefits when a particular assignment needs to be completed quickly.
- *External assignment.* At times it may be possible to give the problem person an assignment outside the activities of the rest of the team. The person may make a contribution to the work unit on an individual basis, whereas the bulk of

the work that requires collaboration is handled by the rest of the team.

All of these suggestions are useful when the person is a serious obstruction to the working of the group. One must always be careful, however, to differentiate the real problem person from someone who sees things differently and whose different views or perspectives need to be listened to and considered with the possibility that this may enrich the productivity of the team. Teams can get too cohesive and isolate a person who is different. As a result, the team may lose the innovative ideas of a person who thinks differently.

However, the most likely reason for failure to take action in the face of a disruptive team member is the team's inability to openly confront such a problem. In one MBA class, a student group was asked to complete a group assignment and then write individually about their experience in the group. As the instructor read the group's individual papers, he found that several students gave a very negative assessment of one woman in the group. The criticisms were so stinging that the professor decided to meet with the group (initially without the woman present) to make sure that he understood the problems accurately. When he met with the group, each member reviewed the problems he or she had with this particular woman. She was overbearing and forced her opinion on others. Moreover, she agreed to do the bulk of the work on the group assignment and then failed to come through with her part on time. This caused the group to finish its project late and produce a rather mediocre product.

As the professor explored what could have been done to solve the problem, he asked the students, "Why didn't you discuss the problems you were having with this woman?" One student replied, "We couldn't do that. She'd think we didn't like her!" Of course, the problem was that the group members didn't like her, and their relationship with her hurt group performance. The group members felt that since this was just a class assignment, they could get through it as best they could, take their grade, and move on to the next class. What they didn't learn was the skill of how to confront and work with a difficult team member.

In Summary

Overcoming unhealthy conflict is one of the objectives of all team leaders. We have found that thinking of conflict as the result of violated expectations is a useful way to identify the source of many conflicts and to take action. We've outlined how teams can reduce conflict and confusion by engaging in role clarification or using the start-stop-continue format. We've also presented some concrete suggestions for how teams can deal with conflicts with the boss, issues of diversity, and the recalcitrant team member. Over the years, we have seen many teams improve their performance significantly by implementing these team-building strategies.