

# Preemptive Conflict Management

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Conflict is inevitable in any human or organizational activity but in our planning strategies and preparation we can miss planning for this portion as we plan for the actual mission, assignment or task. However, preparing for manage conflict in advance pays dividends in the long run. As leaders we can and should spend time to consider how we can be preemptive in conflict management. This is not to suggest we can plan for every event or plan a reaction to all unforeseen conflict but by planning we can mitigate lost time in resolving conflict.

My aim is three-fold. The first is to discuss conflict itself and preemptive conflict management. The type of conflict I will examine will be in the context of negative conflict understanding there is positive conflict as well. The second aim is to discuss leadership style as it relates to preemptive conflict management. Lastly, I will discuss reactive conflict management.

To handle conflict management a leader should understand what conflict is and what sources of conflict could be. What is conflict? Two of the more concise and simple definitions of conflict says that there are two types. Emotional conflict is personal, defensive, and resentful. Cognitive conflict consists of argumentation about the merits of ideas, plans, and projects (Swenson, 2000, p218). Even though there are two types we should consider that both can run hand in hand with each other and need not be thought of as two separate entities. There may be a lot of emotional baggage brought into decision making causing an individual to responds and react to certain ideas, plans, and projects. An example of that could be a team members having be disenfranchised in a group or possibly felt as though their opinions or thoughts weren't valued as much may decide that that won't happen again thus bringing the potential and preparation of

conflict into the group before ideas, plans, and projects are assigned or discussed. This example has their figurative guns loaded and ready to fire before things even begin.

Another example is that one may be emotionally attached to ideas, plans, and projects and may not be able to see other's points of view or ideas because they are fixated on their own. Not seeing outside the box or a bigger picture could be an example of this as well. Thinking narrowly may not be from negative intentions but possibly due to lack of certain experience. Either emotional or cognitive, to understand these definitions will assist the leader in managing conflict.

In addition to emotional and cognitive responses that can cause conflict there can be a number of addition factors that cause conflict that we can explore. These may also overlap with emotional and cognitive responses and be cumulative as well. Uncertainty or ambiguity creates conflict by building tension in not knowing the direction needed to go or lack of clarity in instructions given. Complexity of a task can cause the project to stall due to being paralyzed in decision making. This creates conflict within oneself as well as within the team. External environment is a factor in conflict. Two examples of external environments could be the amount of space needed for the team to operate verses the amount of space actually allotted. Too many times office space management is an after-thought to the planning process.

Cultural difference such as gender roles and religion may create role confusion or indifference within the team or within the area of operations. The role of unintended consequences can never be over-looked as a source of conflict. We have all probably been in a situation where the team

suggested, “had you don’t this, this wouldn’t have happened”. Hind sight is excellent in an after action review, when looking at doing things better, but it’s also great at creating a situation where finger pointing and blame takes over. Just to name a few more, but the list is far from exhaustive, are assuming, anxiety, doubting, inconsistency, resisting adapting, or challenging ones thoughts, beliefs, or assumptions or having yours challenged.

Edgar Schein suggests that in his interviews “conflict referred to a severe disagreement that is difficult if not impossible to reconcile and was bad in the sense that a person who has conflicts is not managing well.” (Schein, 2004, p113). In contrast to the previous example’s suggestion, conflict does not have to be a severe disagreement nor does it reflex poor management. However, “dysfunctional teams pretend conflict does not exist” (Curphy, 2011, p6) so it is dependent on the leader to lay out a plan for preemptive conflict management.

Collaboration and cohesion of a team that is built with differing points of view, interests, cultures, and experiences, finding common ground can lead to a win-win situation for all the team members. Building a strategy for preemptive conflict management can help the team drive to success. Conflict management is defined as, “the ability to de-escalate disagreements and orchestrate resolution.” (Goleman, 1998, p80). I propose that conflict management can be planned and prepared for in advance of conflict as well and should start within the building of the operations order, or instructions, and the standard operation procedures (SOP) giving everyone the common operating picture. I stated earlier that uncertainty or ambiguity creates conflict by building tension in not knowing the direction needed to go or lack of clarity in instructions given. The common operating picture reduces this conflict.

Teams with explicit goals and tasks are less likely to have conflict. In production of the initial task or mission document production, the leader can look for blind spots in the instructions that could produce conflict or confusion. These blind spots could be based on our own assumptions as to how the document is read and understood by team members. Words have meanings but based on individual experiences and culture those meanings can vary. How will what was written be perceived and understood by the team? Is there clarity of task and purpose? These are relevant questions to ask oneself to assist the team to function effectively. Leaders can focus on task conflict, conflicting distribution of resources, about procedures and policies, and about judgments and the interpretation facts (De Dreu, 2001, p313). Studies show that this step can be successful in reducing conflict in advance of it arising. "Task conflict is less threatening to one's personal identity, involves less intense, negative emotions, and tends to motivate team members to search for optimal judgements and decisions." (De Dreu, 2001, p313). The principle take away is to eliminate as much task conflict as possible in the beginning. According to Tuckman's theory of group development in the forming stage behavior can be aimed at avoiding conflict team with routine, administrative functions, and scope of task as well as being comfortable with time. In the norming stage, tasks and responsibilities should be clear and agreed on as well as understanding each other and their skills.

Clear planning and preparing goes a long way in preemptive conflict management. The leader has worked through the planning documents and eliminated as much ambiguity with a clear, concise mission statement, intent, task, purpose, objectives, role assignments, and end state. Having set procedures can reduce conflict and confusion, assumptions can be questioned and clarified, but complex and complicated problems require effort to predict. An imaginative

leader can foresee the conflict and problem in advance, plan carefully and use their leadership style to continue to be preemptive in conflict management.

The second part of preemptive conflict management has to do with leadership style. Having served in the military going on twenty five years I have found that there is a misunderstanding of the military leadership style. Most believe it is a centralized authority giving orders from on high that must be followed to the detail, down to the lowest level soldier. This is only partially correct.

The army uses Mission Command philosophy. “Mission command conveys purpose without providing excessive, detailed direction. Mission Command is the conduct of military operations through decentralized execution based on mission orders for effective mission accomplishment” (FM 6-22, 2006, p7-6). This mixes both centralized orders with the freedom to execute those orders with freedom of action to meet the commander’s intent. The army accomplishes this by using formalizing it’s operations process and using it’s methodology called Military Decision-Making Process. “MDMP helps leaders apply thoroughness, clarity, sound judgment, logic, and professional knowledge to understand situations, develop options to solve problems, and reach decisions” (ADP 5-0, 2012, p8). This does not eliminate conflict but it forms a road map or process with expectations and outcomes at each step so team members are not surprised or confused of where the team is going or how it got there. This allows for various leadership styles to come through.

Researchers show that as one mixes their leadership styles rather than using one form only leaders have a better chance of success in both accomplishing what they need to do as well as being preemptive in conflict. An effective leader can mix their leadership style so all the team members can feel valued and treated fairly. A mixed leadership style can help the team innovate and adapt to challenges. The key though in mixed leadership style is provide a predictable and stable work environment so people don't feel confused or leaderless thus escalating conflict (Goleman, 1998, p85).

Power sharing is a leadership style whereby the team is encouraged to participate in decision making insuring that important perspectives to a problem aren't overlooked (Jago, 1982, p321). Power sharing is not a perfect style to itself since it offers a chance of causing confusion of who the actual leader is. A team member that is outspoken or more extroverted could be perceived as the leader or primary decision maker. One should be aware of a team member's possible attempt at usurping authority or control so clear understanding should be laid out in advance where ultimate authority for decision making lays.

Using a democratic style of leadership allows each member to voice their ideas, opinions, and concerns to the group for decision. This style allows for more face to face time with team members as a group, allows everyone to be part of the decision making process and keeps everyone informed on the direction these decisions are leading. An excellent way to be preemptive in conflict management is allowing the team to buy into the decisions. Ownership of decisions motivates to be successful. However, the challenge of this style, used by itself can backfire. Rather than being preemptive in conflict, it could create more conflict. Some teams

can put off making decision to avoid conflict. That in itself will create frustration within the team. Lack of consensus, subtle disagreements, and conflicts can occur in the attempts to take joint action (Schein, 2004, p79). It should be assumed that conflict is a normal part of relationships but as one engages in joint interaction we increase the chance of conflict. In talking about democratic style of leadership we have to address time considerations. Everyone's time is valuable and should be recognized by the leader. To be preemptive is to not waste the teams time. Endless meetings can mean going to meeting after meeting with no time to enact the decisions or meeting that go on seemingly forever with no direction or resolution. Meetings should be kept to a minimum and within the time constraints. Balancing time and accomplishing consensus must be in the fore front of the leaders mind. There is not a clear answer to this problem but in the planning preparation the leader should address how meetings will be handled.

Once a leader has prepared, planned, organized and integrated their team they will sooner or later have to use reactive conflict management. People at times don't get along, find it difficult to work with each other or as a team or don't like each other. The skilled leader knows that teams "navigate times of high frustration and conflict by using a variety of conflict resolution skills" (McKay, 2009, p18).

Areas or techniques that can be applied in these situations could be discussion, negotiation, or mediation. When discussing the conflict with the people involved, the leader is acknowledging the value of each person's opinion or point of view. This conflict is not avoided and the team works out the issue. Most conflicts can be handled at this level. Either as part of discussion or a



separate form of resolution negotiation is when the team or parties involved are willing to consider the others' interests and needs. As mentioned before to see things through the other team member's eyes assists the team in overcoming conflict when it arises. A third form to bring resolution to conflict is mediation. It is always best to handle conflict at the lowest level “remembering, resolving a dispute through informal mechanisms is usually quicker and less cumbersome” while identifying “the specific decision that you are objecting to, and when the decision was made, or when you were effectively notified of the decision” (United Nations, 2009, p8).

There will be times, however, when you should bring in a third party to help sort things out. Three things should be considered when negotiations or mediation are chosen to resolve conflicts. The first, talking about leadership style, asks what influence techniques and leadership styles will best serve the negotiation strategy? The second is how one will maintain a focus on interests, and not fall back to positions that may be non-negotiable. The third is how the process is kept on track as unexpected events occur throughout the process (CGSC, 2015). In cases of conflict or disagreement, leaders “assist the parties to reach a fair solution through informal fact-finding, informal mediation and discussion, and makes recommendations in order to bring about a resolution satisfactory to all concerned parties” (Durrant, 2004, p18).

As leaders it is important to be preemptive in conflict management. “Leaders should be able to conceptualize this complexity, and constructively influence social and organizational processes in new ways, drawing on different competencies and approaches to engaging beyond what has traditionally been considered essential to effective leadership” (Redding, 2016, p1). To

this end a leader should be aware that they can be a preemptive conflict manager, planning, and organizing with the question in the back of their mind of how they can better communicate to reduce the possibility conflict before it arises and in what ways, using differing leadership styles, they can manage their team to encourage input and cooperation. Once conflict does arise a leader has options at looking at root causes then working with the team varying ways to resolve the conflict.

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