

Managing Conflict in Project Teams

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Conflict in Projects

- We all know that conflict in projects cannot be avoided
- Project Manager and team should realize that conflicts are normal
- Projects are by definition a unique endeavour, therefore, a lot of new things will occur (changes), that lead to stress, that lead to conflict
- Conflict is most prominent during the execution phase of a project
- **Ability to manage conflict is crucial for project success**

Types of Conflicts (I)

Destructive Conflicts

- slowdown or standstill
- can involve “personal attacks”
- distract the team from the project tasks & goals
- usually very emotional



Examples:

- Resource conflicts (esp. in matrix organization)
- Personal conflicts
- Power struggles



Solution:

- Avoid conflict - but do not suppress once it is there

Types of Conflicts (II)

Constructive Conflicts

- deeper understanding and root cause identification
- high quality decisions and commitment
- win-win solutions
- motivate the team



Examples:

- Conflict over a way to set up a process
- Misunderstandings in multicultural project teams
- Conflict of interest among stakeholders



Solution:

- Avoid escalation - but do not avoid the conflict

Dealing with Conflict (I)

Destructive Conflicts: Prevention

- build trust in the project team
- communicate clearly
- destructive conflict is a project risk, and should therefore be included in the risk register



Examples:

- Competition over resources: identify potential overlaps, and work with “what-if” scenarios
- Personal conflicts: train team members for soft skills
- Power struggles: clear hiring strategy; clear HR development program

Dealing with Conflict (II)

Constructive Conflicts: Manage

- debate issues in a friendly manner
- constructive conflict is an opportunity for unleashing creative potentials and project team learning



Examples:

- Misunderstandings: ensure the team has a common understanding from which they can work
- Conflicts over a process design: ensure the pros and cons are discussed, and the best option is chosen

A Word on Compromise

Compromise...

- is NOT a win-win outcome
- can only solve a **conflict of interest**



Examples:

- **Conflict of interest:** two people want to be project manager
→ Compromise: one becomes PM now, the other one in the next project
- **Conflict of values:** someone thinks that women (or men) should not be PMs
- **Conflict of roles:** someone thinks the PM is responsible for performing the business analysis
→ Compromise is not possible

Recommendations (I)

Planning Phase

- foresee potential conflicts

Early Execution Phase

- conduct team building activities
- clearly communicate objectives of the project
- state expectations of the team and individuals
- train team on conflict management
- set rules for dealing with conflict
- train international teams on intercultural communication

Recommendations (II)

If things go wrong

- your team is engaged in a destructive conflict
- an initially constructive conflict got out of hands
- there are unresolved issues beneath the surface
- the PM cannot manage the conflict anymore



Solution:

- Seek the help of a **professional*** mediator - this is money well spent!

*such a professional mediator should not only be trained in conflict mediation, but should also know about project management.

**Thank you for your
attention**

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