TEAM BUILDING AND INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT

Does your team seem to be mired in "personality conflicts?" While different styles and perspectives may create some group tension, it's not always about "personalities." In fact, most conflicts are really based on differences of opinion regarding three primary areas—goals, means of achieving the goals, and the parties' appetite for risk.

In conducting our work in team building, partnering and conflict resolution, we often run into groups who simply need a structured process to have a dialogue that allows these differences to surface and allows the group to seek common ground. If a team can agree that their overall objective is to complete a project successfully, for example, then they can discuss ways to make that possible.

This discussion will allow them to deal with issues related to getting the task done (alternative means of achieving the goal), and with issues regarding communication, decision-making, and conflict resolution (alternatives for the processes employed in getting the task done.) With that discussion they can also explore their collective threshold for risk-taking and design alternatives that will meet both the objectives and their risk propensity.

While it's not always about "personalities," occasionally team conflict is at least aggravated, if not caused, by team members who employ deficient interpersonal skills. Interpersonal skill sets do play an important role in conflict resolution. Some team members often can benefit from enhanced personal awareness of the way they come across to others. We often see this issue arise when working with technical professionals who are very talented and tightly focused on tasks, while somewhat unaware of, or ignorant of, how their personal behaviors—style, tone, body language, etc., set them up for failure when trying to persuade others. By improving their "emotional quotient," they can be more effective team members and make their work, as well as the work of other team members, more productive and enjoyable.

In one case, a very talented professional was viewed as an arbitrary, capricious "SOB" by his teammates who gave numerous accounts of his treating them in ways that they perceived as disrespectful. By summarizing these accounts anonymously, we were able to "hold up the mirror" to him and explain the impact of his actions on his team members. This person was nearly moved to tears when he realized what he had been doing. He apologized to his team and enlisted their help in improving his behavior. They realized some real successes after that.

So in addition to differences over objectives, methodology and risks, team members' interpersonal awareness and skill sets play a part as well. But what if someone refuses to work through a conflict and/or behave appropriately?

Ultimately, people are driven to act in their own self interest. What's in it for them if they do commit to new behaviors? If accountability is lacking, and they can continue to conduct themselves as they always have, why would you expect them to change? Ultimately, individuals must be held accountable for their actions. In *The Wisdom of Teams*, Smith and Katzenbach definition of a "team" includes mutual accountability. In a true team, each member is accountable to each of the other members. If the team has been appropriately empowered, the team should be able to hold one another truly accountable.

On the other hand, if the "team" is actually a work group, merely working together in some fashion, but ultimately accountable only as individuals to their manager, then the manager needs to hold the offending party accountable. We worked with a group of managers who were struggling with some conflicts. There was a brief reduction in the level of conflict, but it resurfaced again after some time. It turned out that the person primarily responsible for it simply chose to quit working on changes necessary to be made. Ultimately, upper management had to send him off to other career opportunities outside the company. Conflict resolution requires more than lip service.

The tone is set at the top. Your people conduct themselves according to the way they see you conduct yourself. Inspirational posters, value statements and plaques mean little if leadership doesn't walk the talk.

This doesn't minimize the value of having appropriate group processes in place. Quite the contrary: a set of guidelines for engagement with one another, (behavioral norms), can be a great tool for teamwork. This is especially important for temporary teams, such as project management teams, who come into the team from a variety of backgrounds and organizational cultures. But it still means little if leaders ignore the rules of engagement.

On a recent project, by the time we were called in, the working environment had become one of constant bickering, intrigue and unresolved conflicts. Leadership treated people disrespectfully, and the team members then began to treat one another disrespectfully. When conflicts arose, they often escalated to shouting and swearing matches. As a result, communication shut down, everyone felt that the other subgroups in the teams were the enemy, and no one trusted anyone outside of their own subgroup. This was a project in trouble. With a change of leadership and the implementation of shared processes for communication, decision making and conflict resolution, the team is now working to reestablish harmonious relationships and get on with their work. It will take time, and it won't be easy, but it can be done.

Dom and his firm assist managers with growth, strategy and performance issues, including organization development, team building, partnering and coaching.

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