



Project Conflict Resolution

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Conflict Resolution and the Project Manager

Abstract

Project Managers deal with conflict and if you have not yet experienced conflict in your project, don't be overly concerned - you will soon enough. At some point in your career, you will be called upon to resolve some type of conflict. At times this will be fairly easy, but on many occasions the resolution of the conflict will be challenging. Some conflicts stem from forces and events that are internal to the project, while others derive from external events and forces. Whenever there are two or more of just about anything and people are involved, there is the potential for conflict. It's a natural consequence of being human and occurs in relationships of every kind. A good project manager always attempts to understand and analyze the nature of any problem he or she is dealing with. This white paper will teach you the different types of conflict, where it stems from, and techniques for dealing with it.

What Is Conflict?

One way of analyzing and understanding a problem is by asking questions that may be directly or indirectly related. A possible first step from a project management point of view is to define what conflict is and what it is not. Therefore, we begin with the question, what is conflict? Following are some of the definitions that seem to fit the context of this discussion:

1. A state of disharmony between incompatible or antithetical persons, ideas, or interests; a clash.
2. A psychic struggle, often unconscious, resulting from the opposition or simultaneous functioning of mutually exclusive impulses, desires, or tendencies.
3. Opposition between characters or forces in a work.

According to Wikipedia¹:

Conflict is a state of discord caused by the actual or perceived opposition of needs, values, and interests between people. Conflict as a concept can help explain many aspects of social life, such as social disagreement, conflicts of interests, and fight between individuals, groups, or organizations.

Conflict as taught for graduate and professional work in conflict resolution commonly has the definition: "when two or more parties, with perceived incompatible goals, seek to undermine each other's goal-seeking capability."

One should not confuse the distinction between the presence and absence of conflict with the difference between competition and cooperation.

Conflict can occur in cooperative situations, in which two or more individuals or parties have consistent goals, because the manner in which one party tries to reach their goal can still undermine the other individual or party.



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The old business view of conflict was that it was inevitable, it was always negative, and should be avoided if at all possible. If it could not be avoided, at some point, upper management should intervene. The new view of conflict, however, which the PMI embraces, is that conflict can, at times, be necessary and beneficial, help foster team growth, enhance creativity, and is best resolved by the team members themselves along with their immediate manager. Only if an issue cannot be resolved in this manner should it be addressed elsewhere.

Some project managers still feel that conflict is something that should be avoided at all costs, but in many workplace environments - especially those where people have differing backgrounds, experiences, world views, and values - conflict can be said to be inevitable.

For most people, conflict is a natural fact of life. Often it is unavoidable, and some feel it is even needed for innovation and creativity in teamwork. In most project situations, conflict is manageable and should not be viewed as positive or negative. As stated earlier, it is simply an opposition of values, ideas, goals, etc., and is largely about perceptions.

Constructive vs. Destructive Conflict

A project team with no conflict is a good thing, right? Be careful what you ask for, because not all project conflict is bad. As long as the established boundaries and limits are adhered to, conflict can be productive for growth and development.

Some good things can come out of conflict:

- People learn to work together.
- The team experiences increased amounts of energy, because conflict does not allow the team to stay stagnant; it causes them to move forward.
- It can foster creativity by forcing team members to see things from new points of view that they would never have thought of otherwise.
- Positive conflict can build cohesiveness among group members.
- Individuals and groups learn to grow and apply their knowledge to future conflict.

Quite often conflict can be constructive, especially when it has the effect of increasing the involvement of everyone and opens up discussions of issues resulting in increased clarification, as in the examples above; when it helps to identify alternatives; results in a solution; or serves as a release for pent-up emotions, anxieties, and stress. Beneficial conflict is more along the lines of a good healthy technical discussion.

On the other hand, not every type of conflict is useful. When does conflict become unhealthy? When does it become destructive? The easy answer is when it becomes counterproductive or when it keeps returning. Whenever it becomes a barrier and an obstacle to reaching the goals and objectives of your project, and/or has become a stumbling block to continue to work with healthy team relations, the conflict is no longer beneficial. When it does not lead to a decision or causes new negative behavior and the problem remains, the problem is not beneficial. Conflict is also destructive when it diverts energy from more important activities and issues, destroys the morale of individuals and groups, reinforces poor self-concept, divides people and polarizes groups, produces irresponsible behavior, and especially when it becomes personal.