While some types of conflict can be detrimental to a team's success, other forms create a more open, more creative, and ultimately more productive team. The key is knowing how to steer the team toward constructive conflict.

Conflict: An Important Dimension in Successful Management Teams

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The use of teams has become "the solution" of the 1990s for many of the ills of the workplace. Cross-functional teams, continuous improvement teams, teams composed of only organizational members, and teams that include customers or suppliers—all are attempts to get closer to the customer and improve employee involvement. This broad deployment of teams emerged as a natural and major component of work environments geared to support total quality management (TQM). Increasingly, leaders are waking up to the notion that broad participation in the decision process is necessary, not only for quality improvement, but also for the very survival and growth of the organization. Creative solutions can come from many different sources; leaders recognize the need to establish the structure to facilitate the process.

With the use of teams, however, has come the concern that efficiency and productivity may actually falter. Experience validates these concerns. Team meetings can lead to poor decisions, lower productivity, member dissatisfaction, and heightened frustration. Some have actually called the team concept the Achilles' heel of TQM.

This article examines several important dimensions of team effectiveness, with particular attention to the management of conflict. Conflict is a natural part of the team environment. But to be effective, teams must be able to *manage* that conflict—and *how they do so* brings out the best or the worst of employee involvement. More specifically, we focus on two types of conflict that teams must manage to enhance their value to the organization.

TEAMWORK—THE PROMISE AND THE REALITY

As an organizational tool, teams can expand the role of the employee beyond the level of "tasks to be performed." Instead of having only responsibility for the specific duties, the employee-as-team-member becomes involved in the larger operations of the organization. A team environment prompts the em-

ployee to spend more time considering his or her role in relation to the organization's goals. Consequently, teams can be looked upon as a means of focusing employees' attention beyond narrow duties to the broader role of meeting external needs, such as the needs of the customer.

Teams have also proved useful in improving the quality of decision making, helping to build consensus and support for action, and helping to build a cooperative, goal-oriented culture. Team interaction helps to build the consensus that is so essential to the execution of a decision. In theory, by having everyone participate in a decision, a better decision should result—one that everyone will accept and work toward.

This is critical when the coordinated efforts of key employees are essential to reaching organizational goals. When creative solutions are needed, teams are especially beneficial because their diverse members can evaluate new and different ideas. Everyone can be called upon to suggest creative ways to better serve the customer with new products or improved processes. These solutions may be modifications to existing processes or could involve a total "rethink" of the problem itself—what is sometimes called "finding a new paradigm."

The reality, however, is often different from the promise. As a result, we are beginning to hear managers voice discouragement—even cynicism—with the use of teams. While teams offer the potential of major breakthroughs, too often they slow the decision-making process. Moreover, the resulting decisions are not much different from what the team leader might have concluded alone.

Decisions over important issues can breed a win/lose mentality, with "political gamesmanship" overpowering a view of what is best for the organization. Team meetings can drag on forever. "Compromised" decisions, sacrificing good business judgment for the sake of "total agreement," fuel frustration among organizational leaders and team members alike. This blight is known as "groupthink," and it infects any group that fails to critically evaluate its own ideas, choosing instead to "get along" rather than challenge their assumptions and perspectives.

WHAT, EXACTLY, MAKES THE DIFFERENCE?

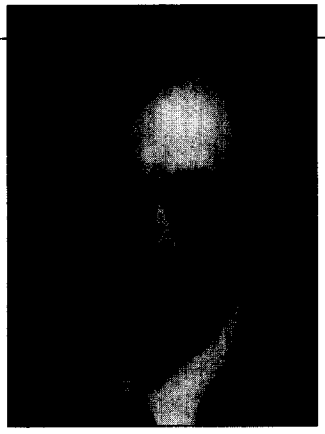
On one hand, teams hold true potential for improving an organization's culture. On the other hand, teams can be a source of problems that hinder or even prevent the organization's advancement.

In an effort to get to the heart of the matter—the pivotal issues on which a team's effectiveness or ineffectiveness hinges—we conducted on-site interviews with teams from ten diverse organizations. In each case, these teams were responsible for making important strategic decisions for their companies. In each case, we found that *how the teams managed conflict* was the crux of team effectiveness. This proved true in industries as varied as seafood processing and furniture manufacturing, and in companies ranging in size from $3 million to $300 million in sales.

The successful teams used conflict to their advantage to arouse discussion and stimulate creative thinking. The less successful teams did a poor job of managing and resolving their differences. They found conflict to be a burden—something to be avoided. This avoidance led to poor decisions and a poor use of the team as a way to improve both decision making and acceptance of the decisions that were made.

Conflict in Teams

Conflict is central to team effectiveness because conflict is a natural part of the process that makes team decision making so effective in the first place. Effective teams know how to manage conflict so that it makes a positive contribution. Less effective teams avoid conflict altogether or allow it to produce negative consequences that hamper their effectiveness. This is one of the paradoxes in understanding the role of teams in organizations. While a number of studies have found that conflict is important to a team's effectiveness, just as



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many studies have concluded that conflict can harm a team's effectiveness.

Are there different types of conflict? Is some conflict good and some conflict bad? Over and over during our interviews with team members, we heard that conflict can improve decision making and enhance a team's performance. We also heard, however, that conflict can create more problems than it solves and thus should, in many instances, be avoided altogether.

Understanding how teams manage conflict first requires understanding that not all conflicts are created equal. The consequences of conflict, whether positive or negative, are largely dependent upon the types of differences that lead to the disagreement. We found that teams generally experience two types of conflict—one that improves team effectiveness and one that is detrimental to teams.

C-Type Conflict

In essence, while disagreements among team members are bound to occur, so long as they focus on substantive, issue-related differences of opinion, they tend to improve team effectiveness. Conflict theorists call these types of disagreements *cognitive conflict,* or what we call *C-type conflict.*

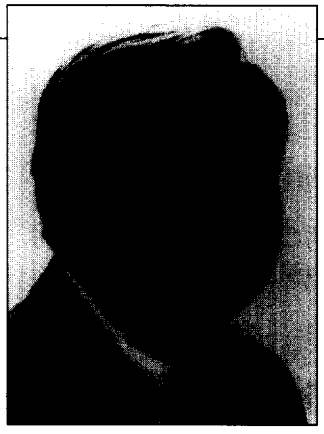
While conducting our interviews, it became clear to us that this type of disagreement is a natural part of a properly functioning team. Natural, because as team members gather to make important decisions, they bring different ideas, opinions, and perspectives to the table. C-type conflict occurs as team members examine, compare, and reconcile these differences. This process is key to the team's ability to reach high-quality solutions that are understood and accepted by all team members. Thus, most of the managers with whom we spoke believed that C-type conflict improves overall team effectiveness.

In one company, a $15 million processing company, the vice president of operations underscored this point by noting that "everyone can't be an expert on everything." Consequently, he explained, different team members are going to have different opinions

about how best to do their work. C-type conflict occurred as this team confronted and resolved these differences. Similarly, a vice president in a $50 million import/export firm stated that "multiple opinions make for better decisions." Of course, before a decision can be acted upon, those differences must be examined and resolved. In another instance, the president of a $42 million wholesale distribution company stated that his team members needed to be "empowered with understanding" to be effective decision makers. In his opinion, empowerment occurred when everyone had an equal opportunity to "speak their minds." This open airing by the team members brought to the surface disagreements about the relative strengths and weaknesses of the different positions and ideas. Once identified, these disagreements could be thoroughly considered and resolved.

C-type conflict is beneficial because it requires teams to engage in activities that are essential to a team's effectiveness. C-type conflict focuses attention on the all-too-often ignored assumptions that may underlie a particular issue. By facilitating frank communication and open consideration of different alternatives, C-type conflict encourages innovative thinking and promotes creative solutions to problems that otherwise might seem insurmountable. As a consequence, C-type conflict improves the quality of team decisions. In fact, without C-type conflict, team decisions are little more than the decisions of a team's most vocal or influential member.

In addition to improving decision quality, C-type conflict also seems to promote acceptance of the decision itself among the team members. By encouraging open and frank communication and by integrating the various skills and abilities of the team's members, C-type conflict builds understanding and commitment to the team's goals and decisions. Team members told us that, as they engage in C-type conflict they tend to "buy into" the decision. The result is not only a better decision but a decision that can be more effectively implemented throughout the organization. The president of the wholesale distribution company mentioned earlier explained that C-type



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From 1984 to 1986, Thompson was the director of the Center for Management and Executive Development for the University of Arkansas and was a major developer of the Walton Institute of Leadership. In this role, he worked directly with Sam Walton and other Wal-Mart executives in developing a week-long program (54 contact hours) for all store managers and assistant managers stressing management and leadership skills. Over the next five years, more than 4,300 Wal-Mart managers attended the program.

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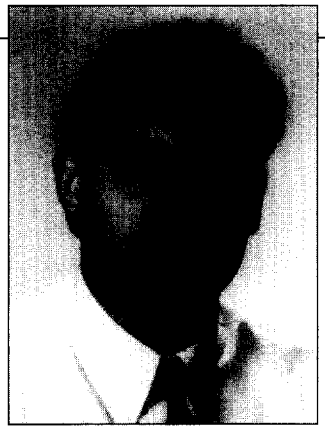

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conflict was a learning process through which team members come to understand how a decision will work and what role they will play in implementing the decision.

To illustrate just how essential C-type conflict can be to a team's effectiveness, consider the example of a $20 million import and wholesale distribution company we visited. So important was C-type conflict in the mind of this company's president that he cited its absence as the primary reason for a poor decision that the management team had made. The president stated that, had that decision been "seriously debated," the team would have recognized the flawed assumptions on which the decision was based. Because the team accepted those assumptions without challenge, the company built a large, state-of-the-art warehousing facility, only to find that they were unable to attract enough new business to make full use of the additional space. In retrospect, the company president believed that some additional conflict would have disrupted the atmosphere of "groupthink" that seemed to characterize the team's meetings. Because there was so little C-type conflict, this team made a mistake that very nearly cost this company its existence.

A-Type Conflict

We also heard frequently that conflict can be harmful. Our study participants explained that conflict can provoke so much animosity among a team's members that decision quality actually declines along with the commitment and understanding necessary to get the decision successfully implemented.

Unlike disagreements over substantive issue-oriented matters, which seem to be largely beneficial, disagreements over personalized, individually oriented matters are largely detrimental to team performance. Conflict theorists collectively call these types of disagreements *affective conflict*—what we call *A-type conflict.* A-type conflict lowers team effectiveness by provoking hostility, distrust, cynicism, and apathy among team members.

The descriptions we heard of A-type conflict all focused on personalized anger or re-

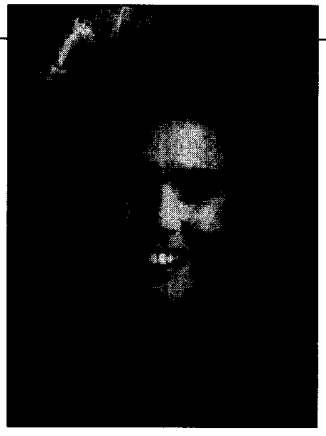
sentment, usually directed at specific individuals rather than specific ideas. We found it especially interesting that these A-type disagreements seemed to emerge when instances of C-type conflict somehow became "corrupted." For example, a vice president at a $300 million international food processing and distribution company told us that when team members challenge one another about their different opinions, "Sometimes they get angry." This individualized anger can persist well beyond the boundaries of the task at hand.

Unlike C-type conflict, A-type conflict undermines team effectiveness by preventing teams from engaging in the kinds of activities that are critical to team effectiveness. A-type conflict fosters cynicism, distrust, and avoidance, thereby obstructing open communication and integration. When that happens, not only does the quality of solutions decline, but commitment to the team itself erodes because team members no longer associate themselves with the team's actions.

Effective teams learn to combine the diverse capabilities of their members. In contrast, team members who are distrustful of or apathetic toward one another are not willing to engage in the types of discussions necessary to synthesize their different perspectives. As a consequence, the creativity and quality of the team's decisions suffer.

Likewise, team members who are hostile or cynical are not likely to understand, much less commit to, decisions that were made largely without their participation. Thus, in the best case, these members are unable to carry out the decision because they do not understand it. In the worst case, these disgruntled team members are unwilling to work to implement the decision as intended. A-type conflict also undermines a team's ability to function effectively in the future. Team members who have been burned by A-type conflict are less likely to participate fully in future meetings.

For example, another vice president at the processing firm mentioned earlier stated that when differences of opinion turned into personalized disagreements, some members of



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the team would simply "throw up their hands and walk away from the decision." Those frustrated team members ceased to be active participants in the decision process. Not only did the team lose the value of their input, but the members lost the desire to work vigorously for the accomplishment of whatever decision was reached.

There was wide agreement among the team members whom we interviewed that A-type conflict adversely affects the willingness of team members to support the team's decisions. Thus, as the president of the food distribution company noted, "If people are angry, they are not going to work for you no matter what you decide."

We heard this sentiment repeated in different ways by nearly all of the team members we interviewed. Basically we were told that as teams experience greater A-type conflict, they tend to become less effective. They make lower quality decisions, their members become less committed to seeing the decisions implemented, and their members become less accepting of the team and its goals. The implication is that for all the different measures of team effectiveness, C-type conflict improves team performance and A-type conflict curtails team performance.

These observations are consistent with other research suggesting that conflict can be both beneficial and detrimental to team effectiveness, depending on whether it is C-type conflict or A-type conflict. As illustrated in Exhibit 1, C-type conflict enhances team effectiveness by improving both decision quality and the chances that decisions will be successfully implemented. At the same time, A-type conflict reduces team effectiveness by decreasing quality and undermining the understanding and commitment necessary for successful implementation of a decision.

HOW TEAMS MANAGE "C" WITHOUT GETTING TRAPPED IN "A"

On the basis of our experiences, the most effective teams are those that seem to be intuitively aware of the two types of conflict. Teams that understand the importance of C-type conflict, and that can use C-type conflict without provoking A-type conflict, seem to develop attributes or abilities that other teams do not have. These attributes or abilities are fundamental to team effectiveness. And while they seem to flourish in the presence of C-type conflict, they all but disappear in the presence of A-type conflict. We labeled these attributes *focused activity, creativity, integration,* and *open communication.*

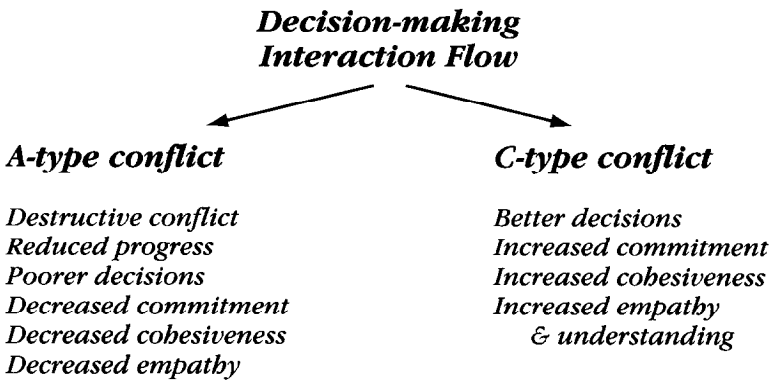
Focused Activity

Effective groups are focused. Focused groups get to the core issues of the problem and stay close to the core. They stick closely to the task at hand and make decisions quickly and efficiently. Less effective groups allow issues to wander. They labor over trivial points and allow task goals to take a back seat to social facilitation. As a consequence, focused groups define problems and develop solutions more quickly than less focused groups.

For example, in a large academic department of a Midwestern university, departmental meetings would regularly last three to four hours. Conversation would drift to matters not relevant to the issue at hand. The end result was a high degree of frustration by members of the team that meetings were a waste of time; nothing ever seemed to get done. A new department chair was hired, one who ran a more focused meeting. To keep the team on track, he would publish an agenda with maximum discussion times indicated for each agenda topic. After the agenda time expired, the team voted on whether to continue on the same topic, vote on the issue at hand, or table the issue for a future meeting. The end result was a higher degree of satisfaction by most team members that their meetings were more productive, and significantly shorter.

The president of another organization, a $100 million furniture manufacturing company, stated that the ability to remain focused and thus make decisions quickly had given his company a distinct advantage over its competitors. The president stated that "one

EXHIBIT 1
THE OUTCOMES OF C-TYPE AND A-TYPE CONFLICT



thing that we're able to beat our competitors with is that we can make a decision." His company was often able to take advantage of opportunities while competitors were still busy trying to define the problem and narrow the alternatives.

Teams that are comfortable with C-type conflict can quickly identify and address the problem and its possible solutions. They can evaluate different alternatives quickly and efficiently without worrying about the political ramifications of their choices. Thus, they can move quickly to closure and on to other matters. Teams that are uncomfortable with conflict tend either to avoid it altogether or allow the conflict to drift onto any number of unrelated issues. Both produce long, meaningless discussions that seem to go everywhere except in the needed direction. The end results are frustration and cynicism.

Creativity

Effective teams encourage thinking beyond normal options. Creativity comes from getting the group to think of problems differently and finding solutions that approach the problem from a totally new perspective. Bob Galvin, former CEO of Motorola, stressed the importance of "listening to the minority report." He particularly wanted to hear opinions that were out of the mainstream. The goal was to generate as many ideas as possible and approach each with an open mind.

CSX Railroad encourages creativity through the use of "stretch goals" that force teams to look for innovative solutions. The only way to reach these types of goals is to rethink the entire system. Teams have the potential ability to *synergize* the thoughts and perspectives of their different members, extracting and combining the strongest parts of each member's ideas. As a consequence, teams are often able to produce innovative solutions to problems that seem insurmountable to single individuals.

C-type conflict is at the very heart of team creativity. By encouraging dissenting opinions and promoting innovative suggestions, Galvin was cultivating C-type conflict. As the president of the above-mentioned furniture manufacturing company said, "We don't need people who just agree." One of the benefits of having diverse team members is that the resulting conflicts will inspire creativity and innovative solutions to problems that, from the perspective of any single individual, looked hopeless. A vice president at a $15 million processing firm told us that "sometimes one of us will see something that the other ones do not see."

However, conflicts that arouse personal animosity and that strain the interpersonal relationships among the team members obstruct

creativity. In the Motorola example, for instance, if some team members felt threatened by other members of the team, they would not likely be willing to offer their creative ideas. Hence, the fruits of A-type conflict—anger, apathy, and avoidance—can undermine a team's ability to produce innovative solutions.

Open Communications

Effective teams have more open communication than less effective teams. Effective teams enjoy a culture that allows their members to speak freely and challenge the premises of other members' viewpoints, without the threat of anger, resentment, or retribution. Open communications are central to getting sincere involvement from team members, which enhances decision quality and reinforces team consensus and acceptance. Less effective teams seem to have less open communications. Team members offer only guarded responses and are fearful of expressing their true opinions. Often, those in less effective teams feel the need to be politically sensitive with their comments. This leads to less communication and results in less effective teams.

Open communications are central to team effectiveness and conflict is a key to maintaining open communications. As one vice president at that food processing plant expressed, "I have a graduate degree in food engineering; another VP's background is in sales. When we make a decision he speaks from his expertise and I speak from mine." Team members overcome this functional specialization by asking one another questions and challenging one another's assumptions. The vice president called this process an "exercise" that facilitated understanding and uncovered flawed logic and outright mistakes.

Naturally, this sort of frank, open, and honest communication produces some disagreement and conflict. Again, however, if team members recognize that the conflict is task-oriented and designed to improve their overall effectiveness, they tend to respond to it positively. It is when the conflict appears to have unhealthy motivations that it begins to undermine team communication. When disagreements seem to be self-serving, promoting the interests of one at the expense of another, team members adopt a defensive stance that prevents open and honest communication.

For instance, the president of the wholesale distribution company related the following story. While considering whether to enter a new line of business, this company's management team became embroiled in a dispute that pitted two VPs against one another. Over the course of several meetings and several weeks, the disagreement between the two became so intense that they quit speaking to one another at team meetings, choosing instead to go to the president on their own to promote their positions. The source of this bitter dispute was the company's bonus system, which would have given a disproportionately high reward to one VP and a disproportionately low reward to the other. Neither wanted to admit being trapped in a self-centered concern, so each found other ways to criticize the decision and the other person. When the president realized the problem and corrected the inequity in the bonus system, the team was able to openly discuss the matter and move forward on the decision.

The message is clear: Teams that can manage conflict can keep the lines of communication open. In theory, open communication and C-type conflict are two sides of the same coin. Each should flourish in the presence of the other. When teams do not manage their conflicts well, however, A-type conflict erupts and team communication inevitably suffers.

Integration

Effective teams make the fullest possible use of all their members. Effective teams are conscious of the need to include and get the best from all of the members of the team. In less effective groups, there is often a disproportionate contribution between members. The value of using a team is lost if only a minority of team members play an active role in the deci-

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sion-making process. Leaders of effective teams, more often than not, help to integrate all team members by seeking out opinions of those who are less active and attempting to moderate the contribution of those members who monopolize the discussion. Integration is particularly important to obtaining a commitment to the decisions being made.

For example, the president of a $35 million chair and bedding manufacturer stated, "You can't simply tell people that this is the way it's going to be and then expect them to go out and do it the way you'd like them to. If they don't buy into it, they're not going to do a good job." This company had just decided to completely reorganize its two factories. The president believed that complete commitment to this decision by all the managers involved would be essential to the decision's success. As such, several rounds of meetings were held, where every team member was encouraged to voice his or her opinions, concerns, and objections, before the decision to move forward was made. The president believed that what he lost in speed while making the decision, he gained back in commitment for ultimately seeing the decision implemented.

Teams that encourage discussion, debate, and integration can gain higher levels of satisfaction from their members than teams that ignore their differences. The ability to manage conflict so that team members feel free to state their concerns or opinions, even when those concerns or opinions counter the majority, is key to achieving integration of the team members. Obviously, the role of the team leader is central in getting each member of the team involved, as well as building the sort of culture that will improve the team's effectiveness. To that end, we now focus on how to build that sort of culture.

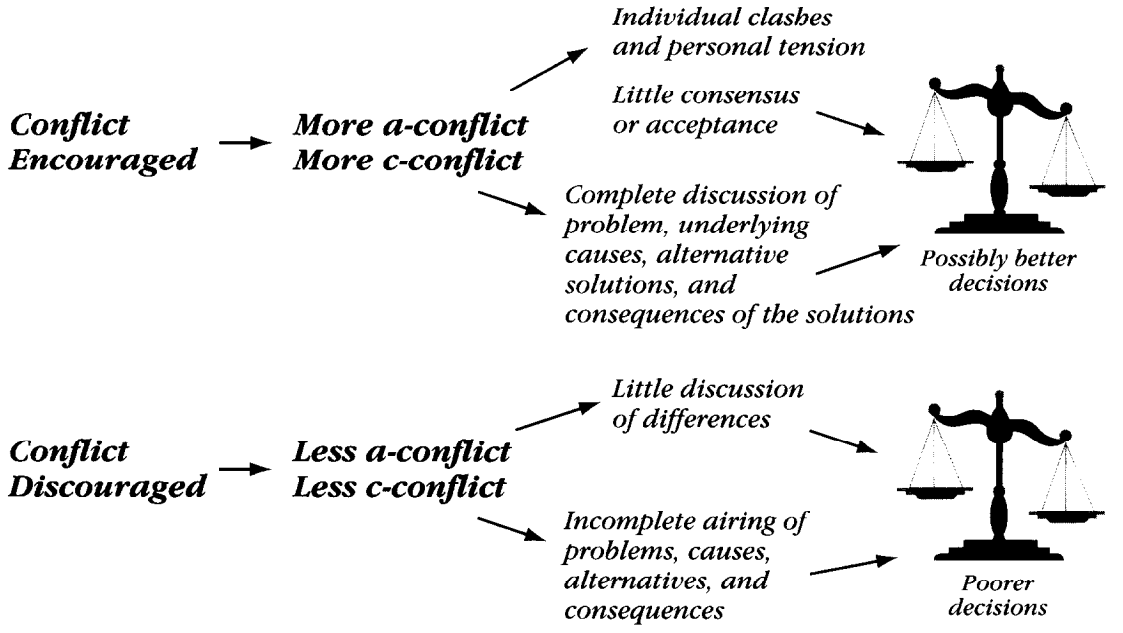
MAKING CONFLICT WORK IN TEAMS

The question for teams is not so much a matter of whether to allow conflict, but how to channel it when it exists. The research on the subject, supported by our own experiences, is clear: conflict *can* improve team effectiveness. The problem is that, once aroused, conflict is difficult to control. Sometimes it remains task focused, facilitating creativity, open communication, and team integration. In other instances, it loses its focus and undermines creativity, open communication, and integrated effort.

Teams must accept conflict if they are to reach their full potential. But, by allowing conflict, teams run the risk of provoking destructive, A-type conflict. As Exhibit 2 illustrates, teams become more effective only when they encourage the good conflict and restrain the bad conflict. The real issue is *how* to do this so as to get the most beneficial aspects of conflict to improve team performance.

One theme that surfaced repeatedly in our interviews held that the responsibility for managing conflict within the team falls disproportionately on the team leader. The following eight steps provide a set of strategies for the team leader to use to build an effective culture before, during, and after the team interactions. Developing the appropriate culture must be the central focus of the leader's responsibilities.

EXHIBIT 2
THE OUTCOMES OF ENCOURAGING OR SUPPRESSING CONFLICT



1. DISSEMINATE A FULL AGENDA EARLY. An effective meeting doesn't just happen; it is planned. A team leader needs to build a positive focus to the meeting and create a full understanding of the team's purpose in the process. Thus, an agenda is critical. An agenda provides focus and can do much to reduce A-type conflict. For example, the leader can order the agenda to discuss the less controversial items first. This may encourage participation while desensitizing the team members to the more emotional issues to come later.

If meetings begin with a highly controversial issue in which team members have a personal stake, C-type conflict may quickly erode into A-type conflict. In other words, a team that gets off on the wrong foot may find it difficult to get back on track. Making less sensitive decisions first may also give the team momentum for making more controversial decisions later. Once they have achieved early successes, team members may begin to feel more like members of an effective team.

It may be helpful to require that the agenda not only have an itemized list of proposals to consider, but also include the proposals and their rationales. This has the advantage of allowing members to consider proposals ahead of time and get clarification if needed. In addition, team members will have a sense that all the issues are aboveboard and that each team member is coming to the meeting with full knowledge of the issues to be covered. This will save time in the meeting, in that proposals will not have to be formulated, only modified through the team's discussions.

Also, allowing the team members to consider the proposals before the meeting gives them the time to carefully formulate their own reactions. This will improve the quality of the discussion and the resulting decision. Presenting surprise proposals at meetings is not a good strategy to build trust.

2. STATE THE PHILOSOPHY FOR THE TEAM AND BACK UP THAT PHILOSOPHY. Stating the philosophy behind team decision making will be helpful. A discussion of the

importance of C-type conflict to the process, combined with cautions about the dangers of A-type conflict, should be a part of this discussion. The team should openly consider how the team leader should act when A-type conflict begins to arise. The road map that evolves from this discussion will help the group understand the positive and negative aspects of conflict and what ways might be used to ensure that the process stays on track toward C-type conflict.

The key, however, is not just to openly discuss how best to structure the team's environment, but to back up that discussion with concrete actions that produce the desired environment. Discussion without action will not be sufficient.

3. PROVIDE THE RIGHT ENVIRONMENT FOR THE MEETING. Providing the appropriate environment can increase the team's performance and reduce A-type conflict. For example, seating location at the meeting might be assigned in advance so that there are no appearances of coalitions. Having team members seated in a neutral order that keeps members from the same department separate may foster the development of networks and friendships within the total team. The goal is to focus on the group as the center of relationships, not the various organizational departments that team members represent.

Finally, even the shape of the meeting table can help reduce the potential for affective conflict. Round tables neutralize status or power. Rectangular tables accent status or power, giving the person at the head of the table the appearance of greater command.

While these sorts of details may seem petty to some, remember the kind of environment that needs to be created. Members with negative dispositions are likely to read the worst into every situation and thus may respond to the perception of A-type conflict, even when none is present.

4. HAVE BEHAVIORAL STRATEGIES TO RUN THE MEETING IN MIND BEFORE THE MEETING BEGINS. While structuring the team meeting is important, the behavior of the team leader is central to keeping the meeting productive. What kinds of traits should the team leader exhibit? There is a great deal of research indicating that openness and cooperativeness are necessary for the effective use of conflict. Increasing the level of openness to diverse and dissenting opinions can stimulate C-type conflict where none previously existed. Similarly, encouraging and rewarding cooperativeness can avert some of the personal insecurity and distrust that prompt A-type conflict. In our own experience, we found that teams whose interactions were open to and tolerant of criticism and dissent experienced more positive C-type conflict. We also found that more cooperative teams experienced less negative A-type conflict. For example, the president of a $42 million wholesale distribution firm we interviewed stated that his primary responsibility was to "initiate a cooperative decision-making system" where openness and cooperation are encouraged.

Openness and cooperation do not just happen, however. The leader has to have strategies to ensure a climate of openness and cooperation. This is difficult because the leader is also concerned with proceeding with the stated agenda. Sam Walton, founder of Wal-Mart, would often appoint someone else to lead the team through the agenda during the company's Saturday morning corporate general meetings. Walton would then be free to focus on the process aspects of the meeting, observing elements such as, "Are people understanding what the organization is trying to do? Do people agree with what is being said? Is there commitment toward the goals? Is dissent being shared so that it can be dealt with openly?" He would interject into the meeting, asking questions, validating acceptance of what was being said, or challenging team members to become the devil's advocate. Obviously, to fulfill this role the leader must "read" the verbal and non-verbal cues from the team, which is hard to do when the leader is also directing the agenda.

5. KEEP A SENSE OF WHERE THE DISCUSSIONS ARE GOING. To further encourage cooperativeness and openness, the team leader may need, at least initially, to facilitate and strictly monitor team discussions in order to limit personalized statements made during

heated debate. Personalized statements such as "your idea," or "my department," or "you don't know what you are talking about," or "you don't understand our situation," place emphasis on the individual rather than the idea. Such individual emphasis may detract from the collective group nature required to make effective decisions. These types of statements would move conflict toward A-type and away from the C-type.

Personalized or individualized statements may also anger some individuals, further reducing openness and cooperativeness. For example, the VP of marketing may suggest to the VP of operations that he or she alter the production schedule to meet a unique demand in the marketplace. If the VP of manufacturing responds, "You don't know what you are talking about because you don't understand our operation," the VP of marketing will probably respond as though personally attacked. Such an attack would likely result in hostility and anger, which would likely prompt a personal counterattack. Once aroused, this groundswell of A-type conflict would undermine the chances of reaching any sort of solution that would be satisfactory to both parties.

6. CHANNEL DISCUSSION FROM A-TYPE CONFLICT TOWARD C-TYPE CONFLICT. The team leader needs not only to monitor team discussions, but also to channel discussion from A-type conflict back toward C-type conflict. It is not sufficient merely to monitor the process—the leader must also act to keep the group focused on the positive aspects of open discussions. It takes particular skill for the leader to be sensitive to the behavioral dynamics of the meeting. The leader must balance the goals of open and frank discussion of the issues while also trying to reduce the tendency towards A-type conflict. In essence, the leader is trying to draw people out to get their opinions, but also trying to get those opinions by a means that will not personally attack others in the process.

However, when the leader suppresses A-type conflict, he or she runs a risk: might the rest of the group read into it that the leader really only wants to hear one side of an argument? That possibility makes the leader's job doubly difficult and it takes a well-focused leader to encourage a full discussion of the topic in a C-type manner while making it clear that A-conflict will not be tolerated.

The team leader may need to hold an open discussion on why he or she wants to change the direction of the discussion. This may be necessary to help team members understand how to focus their comments so they are directed toward the issues and not toward the individuals. Initially at least, it will likely be hard for team members to see the difference. Research has shown that most people cannot readily distinguish between the different types of conflict. As children, we learned to think of ourselves as "bad" when we were corrected for acting in a certain way, rather than to see the action as "not appropriate." Hence, the leader has quite an education job to do.

7. SUPPORT THE TEAM. A leader must continually exhibit behavior that shows support for the team. As discussed above, there is a need to focus the team so that it is functioning as a team and not a collection of individuals. This team focus increases the caring nature of each member toward each other and builds support for the team decision. Support for the team is important as it tends to replace much of the "you versus me" mentality of individual group members with an "us" mentality, which is essential for trust and confidence to develop. A stronger sense of identity will strengthen the group's ability to wrestle with meaningful, positive conflict without the destructive nature of negative conflict.

For example, part of Wal-Mart's difficulty is bringing a sense of family into a very large organization. Yet it is important to have people work for Wal-Mart as an organization, not for themselves or their departments. Wal-Mart, under Sam Walton, wanted each associate to care about serving the customers and looking toward improving the organization. At weekly meetings in Bentonville, Arkansas, Walton would ask people for their comments on issues being discussed. He honestly wanted to know what each person's feelings were on the issue. At times he would challenge the

group to make the situation better. Walton wanted to support the notion of the Wal-Mart "family." There was a higher purpose in an associate's life at Wal-Mart than just doing his or her job. Creating this greater purpose is behind much of the employee empowerment issues in the total quality management approaches advocated by such experts as Deming, Juran, and Crosby. The individual employee is the key to making the organization succeed through involvement in decision making and in the organization unlocking the individuals' creativity while building commitment to the organization.

8. BE PROACTIVE AND REACTIVE, NOT PASSIVE. To take many of the concepts above and roll them into one set of actions, the team leader must actively support a positive culture for the team. The development of this culture is done before, during, and after each team interaction. The leader's behavior needs to focus on building the team and the culture that will support active debate that is positive and constructive. The leader needs to be supportive of group members to bring them into the decision process and to ensure that they believe that their views are being heard and acted upon.

The practice of distributing a full agenda, with proposals attached, before the meeting, demonstrates that each member is important to the team. This action implies that each member should have an opportunity to consider the agenda in advance in order to develop their own opinions. In addition, the leader should contact team members in advance to see that they understand the issues that will be considered in the meeting. This reinforces the importance of each member to the process.

During the meeting, the leader continues the job of reinforcing a climate that is supportive of the group and the group's work. Again, the goal is to build a team-centered decision-making body in which every member is a valued and important contributor.

After the meeting, the leader can do much to further reinforce the team and build a performance-centered culture. Minutes that reflect the issues and thinking of the meeting can be shared and the leader can thank each member personally for their contributions. The leader can also reward the team as a whole for their efforts rather than try to single out individuals for particular praise or attention.

CONCLUSION

Our investigation has shown that the ability to discourage A-type conflict while encouraging C-type conflict is critically important to the overall team success. Unfortunately, the task is not at all simple, and many teams perform well below their potential. However, by focusing on critical, fundamental issues—not the personalities of the participants—teams are, at least, pointed in the right direction. This discussion can best be summed up by the CEO of a petroleum firm who stated, "Our biggest problem was that we found that we were making lousy decisions. Basically, we found that we had two groups left standing at the end of our meetings, those who won and those who lost." Not surprisingly, this team experienced a great deal of A-type conflict. However, when it adopted techniques that nurtured only issue-related conflict, the focus changed dramatically. "We found that our decisions were of higher quality," noted the CEO, "and we had only one group standing at the end—all winners."

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