The Ladder of Unmanaged Conflict

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Abstract

Because building software is a social process, navigating conflict in the software development process is a large part of what occupies team member time. It seems to be perennially scary to deal with conflict. NOT dealing with conflict has a very high cost that is often unacknowledged; it can destroy teams and entire organizations. Using proven research and anecdotes drawn from the speaker's experience, this paper will address:

- A model to help us think about various ways of responding to conflict
- How conflict escalates and the signs of escalation
- What effective conflict engagement actually is
- Basic techniques for de-escalating conflict
- Reasons not to fear dealing with conflict

Attendees will take away:

- A simple model for identifying conflict processes.
- Techniques for short-circuiting escalation.
- A fresh perspective on the "scariness" of conflict.

Biography

A software development professional since 1989, Jean Richardson is experienced in adaptive and predictive project management, writing, training, public speaking, and requirements and business analysis. She holds a B.A. in English with minors in economics and administrative systems management and is completing an M.A. in Organizational Communication in Winter 2011. Her master's thesis is titled In Your Own Hands: Personal Integrity and the Individual's Experience of Work Life *and focuses on personal integrity through the lens of agile methods, specifically, Scrum. She holds PMP, CSM, CSPO, and ITIL certifications, has met the Oregon Department of Justice standard for court-based mediators and has been mediating in the court system for over 10 years.*

As a consultant, her client list boasts a wide range of businesses including ADP, Chrome Systems, CoreLogic, Intel, Freightliner, Kaiser Permanente, Kryptiq Corporation, Mentor Graphics, Oregon Health Authority, The Regence Group, Tripwire, and US Bank. EPHT GEORGE, a project Jean managed for the Public Health Division of the Oregon State Department of Human Services, won the Project Management Institute 2009 Project of the Year Award for the Portland Chapter.

1.   Introduction

In one company, a group of leaders sit around a table concerned that their division is going to miss its annual goals again. This is not the first time this has happened. This is the third year in a row. The three years prior to that, the division had made its goals—technically, but it had squeaked by, and those who were around back then had to make a strong case to get executive management to agree that the goals had been met. Some of them are middle managers responsible for functional areas. Some of them are leaders of the larger teams in the division. As they talk about the situation they find themselves in at the beginning of the third quarter, they are interrupted several times by messages being brought in by the administrative assistant for the director who is in the room. A serious argument has broken out among team members in a planning session for the upcoming release. The message sent back out of the room to those team members is that they are "all adults," and they should resolve the conflict for themselves. The managers are focused on important strategic planning for the remainder of the year . . .

In another company, a senior contributor who has been interested in moving into leadership was appointed to a lead position on a project critical to the success of the organization several weeks ago. However, the characteristics that previously caused him to develop a reputation for raging and factionalizing the work group have begun to re-emerge under the pressure of transitioning to leadership. The leadership team that placed him in the role is hoping that someone else will take care of the problem; most of them have had unpleasant encounters with him and are tired of dealing with his human resources complaints about them. They realize that he could have a deleterious effect on the team he has been assigned to lead, but they're hoping for the best. They are discussing an incident in which two of them saw him yelling at a female contractor last week. Another one noted that she heard he took his team out for a two hour lunch the previous Friday, though she also knows the team is way behind on their commitments. They all look at each other. Is anyone going to take this on?

In over 20 years of experience in the software industry I have seen many teams wrestle with "teaming," the modus operandi of working together toward common goals with people you may or may not like or choose to spend time with outside of the workplace. In many environments, people are not even comfortable enough with the term "conflict" to use it, and so they resort to euphemisms like "problems," "problem solving," "challenges," "opportunities," and so on. To set the context for our conversation today, we will define the term "conflict" as:

> That which occurs whenever two or more people perceive they have opposing interests.

This is not a "personality conflict" and this paper does not address the topic of personality conflicts. That's a different topic, though it interacts with the topic of this paper. The focus of this paper is to understand how conflict typically evolves if it is neither managed nor resolved and to learn a simple technique to prevent an escalation of conflict and, instead, move toward resolution.

2.   Responding to Conflict

To begin, it's important to understand how to identify an interest as well as how to identify the close cousins it travels with, issues and positions. When conflict arises it can be identified in a number of ways which we are all familiar with: raised voices, scowling looks, phrases such as "I disagree," "You're not hearing me," and so on. But it can also be identified by averted eyes, silences, and puzzled expressions. As the conflict evolves someone may well start "defining the problem space" or stating her "position."

During the discussion, you may well hear someone try to calm and organize the discussion by listing issues. From a conflict navigation perspective, these critical terms are defined below:

- **Interests** are expressed in generalized language with reference to the conflict. They are often not concrete. Interests are the keys to finding workable solutions for each issue: a specific need or desire that a person has and wants to satisfy.
- **Issues** are components of a larger problem.
- **Positions** appear to be black and white or binary expressions. There is usually more than one viable position for every interest.

One effective way to navigate emerging conflict is to listen for the interests, table the positions, and collect the issues to help inform the resolution.

Some people, even people in leadership positions, like to take the approach that if we just ignore the conflict or "give it time," the conflict will go away. Sometimes that works, but generally it doesn't. It's important to understand the risks of avoidance, particularly if you are in a leadership position. Carpenter and Kennedy in *Managing Public Disputes: A Practical Guide for Government, Business, and Citizens' Groups* (Carpenter & Kennedy 2001), have provided a concise representation of what tends to happen when conflict is not managed, or resolved. The bullet points below are adapted from their work and listed in order of least to most severe.

The Ladder of Unmanaged Conflict

- ***The Problem Emerges.*** *Initially, parties may express curiosity or mild concern about an issue. When parties receive an unsatisfactory answer, or are ignored, the spiral moves up.*
- ***Sides Form.*** *The longer the conflict remains unmanaged, the greater likelihood that parties involved will position themselves with one side or the other. As people form opinions, they feel the need to get together with others who have similar views. Sometimes, the media finds the differences between the sides to be fertile ground for news stories. The conflict expands as more people learn about it through "word of mouth" and/or the media.*
- ***Positions Harden.*** *People talk more with others of similar views, and less with people with whom they disagree, even in situations not related to the dispute. People become rigid in their perception of the problem and their opponents.*
- ***Communication Stops.*** *Information is exchanged haphazardly, or not at all, between the parties. Misunderstandings are common, and communication becomes increasingly adversarial. Public discussion can turn into public debates. Listening to each other is unpleasant, and effective communication stops.*
- ***Sides Strengthen Their Positions.*** *Individuals gain a sense of power from being part of a group (side), and become ready to commit resources (financial, as well as personal time) to win the battle. People begin to look outside of the dispute community for support and power. Lawyers, supervisors, or other "middle people" come between the parties and prevent face to face negotiation.*
- ***Perceptions Become Distorted.*** *Parties lose objectivity in their perceptions of the conflict, and of the character and motives of their adversaries. Shades of gray disappear, and only black and white remain.*
- ***Sense of Crisis Emerges.*** *It now seems there is little hope in resolving the original dispute. The parties are now willing to bear high costs (emotional, financial, etc.) that would have seemed unreasonable earlier. The goal becomes progressively to win at any cost.*
- ***Outcomes Vary.*** *Litigation, firing or resigning employees, arbitration from outside parties, and even violence are traditional outcomes.* (Richardson & Burk, 2003)

3. How conflict escalates and the signs of escalation

Conflict can escalate in a moment or over time. Escalation is supported by behaviors such as inappropriate avoidance or confrontation. Lack of effective management of emotions or unwillingness to engage in safe and productive conversations can cause parties to escalate the conflict. Escalation is not always accompanied by raised voices, as the Ladder of Unmanaged Conflict shows. For example, when a sense of crisis emerges, it's just as likely for voices to be hushed with heads together in cubes as it is for anyone to raise his or her voice. It's also not unlikely for people to begin to avoid each other—either through not attending meetings or responding to email or simply not looking each other in the eye during small group discussions.

However the escalation manifests itself, you can be sure that stress levels are elevated and that the amygdala, or animal brain, is more active than those parts of the brain more adept at complex reasoning. Emotions are flowing and fear is generally part of the mix, even if it is masquerading as anger.

4. What effective conflict engagement actually is

Conflict engagement is *effective* in a workplace context when the work is moved forward, the work group's work processes are minimally disturbed, and all relationships are preserved to the greatest degree possible—in some cases, even strengthened. As Diana McLain Smith describes at length in *Divide or Conquer: How Great Teams Turn Conflict into Strength* (Smith 2008), conflict can be valuable in strengthening relationships and building effective teams. In fact, work teams which cannot acknowledge the existence of conflict, let alone lack the skills to navigate it are inherently "stuck" and unproductive, since creativity—generativity, which is essential to our work—requires effective conflict engagement.

This does not mean that sometimes effective conflict engagement does not result in an action as extreme as a termination or involuntary removal from a team. What it does mean is that the conflict is addressed in a manner that results in resolution so that attention can be directed away from an ongoing dispute and back toward the work. We are, after all, in the knowledge creation business, and full attention is required for the successful prosecution of that work.

The most desirable form of conflict resolution occurs directly between the individuals involved in the conflict at the time it arises and is initiated and completed by them. Because of this, the direction from the distracted managers in the first example in the introduction makes sense. However, it's also clear that the team members in conflict were appealing to a higher authority to help manage or resolve the conflict. This may have been because they lacked the skills to resolve it themselves or felt they lacked the authority to do so, in which case management's appropriate function is to get the train back on the rails: Model effective conflict engagement and coach those skills into the team members so that, the next time, they can resolve it among themselves.

In *Controlling the Cost of Conflict* (Slaikeu & Hasson 1998) the authors cite a four option model: Avoidance, Collaboration, Higher Authority, and Unilateral Power Play. Collaboration and Higher Authority provide the best outcomes, with Collaboration providing greater long-term mastery and relationship building for all parties than Higher Authority. The table below describes these four options.

Avoidance	Collaboration	Higher Authority	Unilateral Power Play
• No action to resolve the conflict.	• Individual initiative. • Negotiation by the parties. • Mediation by a third party.	• Referral up line of supervision, or chain of command; internal appeals; formal investigation.	• Physical violence. • Strikes. • Behind-the-scenes maneuvering.

"The 'preferred path' for cost control encourages collaborative options first, with higher authority in a backup role" recommend the authors (Slaikeu & Hasson 1998, p. 22). The authors' data shows that, though Collaboration is the most desired and beneficial model, the models most in use in organizations are the Higher Authority and Unilateral Power Play models. The predictable costs from the Avoidance and Unilateral Power Play models are loss of productivity and legal costs. The next most expensive alternative is the Higher Authority model because more resources (managers) must be brought to bear on the problem. While collaboration deals with the problem at it source, preferably through the use of skills already resident in the parties to the conflict. Where that does not occur, management engagement to deal with the problem currently in evidence and to build in those skills so the parties can navigate the problem on their own is the best alternative. Management avoidance can move the conflict down the ladder of unmanaged conflict discussed above.

Mediators talk about conflict resolution versus conflict management. This is a philosophical difference, and collaborative practices tend to favor resolution because it results in the greatest synergy. What is resolution and how do you know when you have achieved it? Resolution is a feeling state though it may be expressed intellectually. Sometimes a facilitator or mediator may ask something like "Do you feel complete with this," or, "Is this conversation complete for you?" as a means of eliciting whether an individual feels the conflict is resolved. Sometimes one or more parties to the dispute may be startled by a sense of the conflict having "disappeared" as though it somehow just left the room. And, not uncommonly, true resolution of a conflict is accompanied by some level of reconciliation with the other part(ies) to the dispute, and even a deeper sense of relational intimacy may suddenly be sensed. This deeper sense of awareness and empathy that accompanies a resolved conflict generally comes about because of new information that is shared, new perspectives that are gained, and a sense of being heard and accurately perceived by another.

5.   Basic techniques for de-escalating conflict

Obviously, if conflict is escalating in a physically or verbally violent direction, physically separating the disputants into different locations is important. If you are the person who is suddenly feeling stronger hostile or defensive feelings, the best choice may be to say you need to take a break. But this is the point at which avoidance can seep in to the conflict, so it's important to take action as soon as possible to arrange for a more safe and productive engagement on the content.

A recent client of mine had an interesting repeating pattern of what I came to call "performance art conflict" on one of their teams. Pretty much every day just like clockwork two team members engaged in verbally aggressive conflict about their work with raised voices and often both standing up at their desks in the bullpen contesting like software gladiators. Managers sitting nearby would have to intervene, calm them down, and manage the conflict, but obviously whatever the underlying conflict was that was feeding

this flame was never resolved or the late afternoon performances would have become a thing of the past. Imagine the effect on the rest of the team witnessing—or being subjected to this performance. A technique that might be applied in such a situation would be to lead the disputants away from the work area, inquire into the effect they may or may not have observed they are having on their teammates, surface the underlying conflict, focus on that, and pursue resolution through an interest-based mediation process with the objective of transforming the dynamic in play.

Mediators talk about content versus process in a conflict. The process is the container that holds the content—what the dispute is about. An example of the *content* of a conflict might be that you implied that my team made a commitment that we believe we did not make. The process can be very helpful in de-escalating a conflict. A typical example of formal interest-based *process* is:

- Make an initial agreement about what the problem (the conflict) is about.

- Each participant lists the reasons resolving the conflict is important to us (our interests) and see where our interests coincide. For instance, we may want to have the respect of our peers and performance art conflict may not be the best way to get that respect, but it could be a great way to be seen as a whiner or a scary person to work with.

- Each participant lists what about the resolution (the issues) is important to us—the components of the problem as we see it. This is a discussion activity during which people may start listing solutions to the problem and may need guidance to help them stay out of that space until they are clearer about the components of the problem may be.

- First one of us then the other of us will say how we think we got to this point, and we will listen to each other in a manner that seeks new information while the other is speaking, which may require the support of a third party present to help us hear each other.

- Finally, based on the data that we have collaboratively gathered about the conflict and what it will take to resolve it, we create an action plan. This plan will be focused on meeting our interests, and addressing the issues, and being vigilant for the emergence of ineffective conflict in the future.

In addition to the typical interest-based conflict resolution model above, it is also important to deal with difficult and distracting emotions. As discussed in section 3 above, as stress levels increase, the portion of the brain adapted for dealing with complex problem solving is less accessible. This is a result of both chemicals in the bloodstream which are generated when our fight-or-flight response is triggered and the fact that blood flow in the body actually moves more toward large muscle groups in our arms and legs and away from the brain when we are in fight-or-flight mode. You provide a service when you recognize this in yourself or another and take action to help disengage the fight-or-flight response: After all, it's not likely to be useful to fight or flee a typical conflict in the workplace.

To short-circuit the fight or flight response, first BREATHE in and out slowly and deeply once, twice, and then again to help calm emerge. Slow, deep breaths calm the body and help return the mind to clarity. Next, check in with yourself to see whether it might be a good idea to take a break, get a drink of water, or take a walk. These simple things help you return to a clearer frame of mind. If you are in a meeting and really feel you absolutely cannot leave, you can still take a minute or two to collect yourself.

If you are witnessing the emergence of the fight-or-flight response in another person, it can be effective to get their attention or simply walk up to about an arm's length from them and practice the calming breaths yourself. If they are making eye contact with you, it's not unlikely that they'll notice your change in breathing and change their own; if they are not, your calming presence still likely helps calm them.

It can be helpful to use what some conflict experts call "sponges" to help absorb some of the energy of the emotion in the room. "Sponges" are empathetic phrases such as:

- "That must have been difficult for you."

- "It's clear that was upsetting."

It can also be helpful to use distraction techniques including joining in and escalating the intensity slightly beyond the level currently modeled by the angry person: use this one with care. (Aikido practitioners may recognize this technique.) Responding in such an unexpected way can help the other person "see themselves" and inspire a quick modulation of their behavior.

People who are overtly expressing anger—raging—can both frighten others and draw energy for their emotional outburst from onlookers. In extreme situations, there can be danger of physical violence. Therefore, encouraging an angry person to come away from an audience will be helpful in de-escalating volatile situations.

And, finally, if appropriate accept responsibility for offense and apologize as needed is also effective in de-escalation. However, apologies without "teeth" do not have a positive effect. A complete apology has three parts: acknowledgement of the specific nature of the offense, expression of regret for the effect of the offense, and a specific plan to prevent it from happening again. Note that apologies are not always appropriate, so defaulting to this technique if the situation does not call for it will not likely help address the level of emotionality.

For instance in the case of our performance artists above, suppose that they were representatives of testing and development functions and the most common argument was about whether a bug was fixed or why bugs tended to be repeatedly reopened. Management might very well need to intervene to stop the ineffective engagement, lead them away from the stage, and gain agreement on what is nurturing the pattern of conflict. It might be time pressure and unclear expectations. The interests might include a desire to be seen as competent professionals within their specialties in the eyes of both their managers and their peers and to be respected for their professional mastery. An issue may be lack of a documented defect handling process; another might be lack of clear requirements. A plan might be to collaborate on a team-level defect handling process even if there is no organizational process and to reject unclear requirements or for QA and development to review requirements together with the source of those requirements before coding them. And, in this particular scenario, there may need to be apologies either to each other or to the team who have been repeatedly distracted by this performance.

6.   Conclusion

Conflict often does not go away on its own, but left unaddressed, it generally traverses the ladder of unmanaged conflict, harming relationships, work products, and entire work groups along the way as well as wasting time and money. Like most aspects of human relationships, dealing with conflict is often messy. But methods such as interest-based mediation can help provide a safe container in which to hold a conflict so that it doesn't spiral out of control.

A great motivator for inspiring courage in dealing with conflict is an understanding of the ladder of unmanaged conflict and the knowledge that conflict left unaddressed is likely to worsen rather than resolve itself. If we do value our working relationships—and these relationships are the means through which knowledge work is conducted—then engaging productively in conflict will likely become an almost everyday occurrence. We have more to fear in avoiding conflict and letting it fester than in taking steps to

acknowledge its existence and inquire into how it might be resolved and our working relationship strengthened. The responsibility for doing this lies first with the parties to the dispute themselves, but if they lack the skills or the will to do so, then managers or other leaders in the organization abandon their stewardship responsibilities if they do not step in because unmanaged conflict wastes resources and can result in tremendous damage to teams and individuals.

References

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