

When Conflict Spirals Out of Control

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When conflict is avoided and unmanaged, it increases to a level where an organization can disintegrate in a number of ways.

Every manager's job contains an aspect of conflict management. Managers in technology development environments are under special pressure—especially these days—to manage conflict effectively. Unmanaged conflict throttles productivity and escalates staff turnover rates. Since technology development is all about harvesting great ideas from fertile minds it's imperative to keep those minds free to think up those great ideas.

A certain level of conflict is important to the creative problem solving process. But how can you identify those times when conflict has spiraled out of control? Here is a typical conflict escalation pattern, based on the work of Carpenter and Kennedy, to help you target the moment to proactively manage a 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.

Given the potential for crisis, you might think the earlier you intervene, the better. Actually, if you intervene too early, what is the risk to the creative process? A certain level of conflict is

required to spark creative ideas. However, once positions begin to harden, the kind of fluidity required for the creative mind to work is gone. And, when communication stops, there is no more collaboration. The synergy of your group is stifled.

Preventing the Crisis

How can you best manage conflict when you know you need some, but it's like nitro glycerin: In one form, it can solve a problem (stop a heart attack). In another form, it can create many problems (even kill people). You can do three things.

- First, acknowledge that conflict is a necessary and natural part of your work environment and train your staff to manage it where it starts – with every interpersonal interaction.
- Second, gain the skills you need to intervene with skill and confidence as a conflict escalates on your team, thereby nurturing team member's problem solving abilities and minimizing the risk that some team members will ultimately leave because of entrenched conflicts.
- Third, when a conflict has escalated to the point that communication is endangered, and you have employed the skills you feel comfortable with in the circumstances, call in an external mediator to facilitate a discussion between the team members who are in conflict. Very often a third party can facilitate movement in an entrenched conflict simply because they are not part of the system in which the conflict is taking place.

Acknowledging that conflict is part of your work environment may seem like either a risky or an obvious thing to do. In many technology development environments, conflict is not muffled or considered taboo. In other environments, if you acknowledge you have conflicts with other people, you can be labeled as “not a team player” rather than as a vital part of a problem solving organization.

Conflict management is a basic people management skill. As Rosabeth Moss Kanter relayed to Moira Gunn in their March 27th 2001 interview on “Tech Nation”, people skills are what make successful technology companies. Technology cannot stand on it's own in the marketplace.

There are a variety of resources available to you in gaining these skills. You can download an annotated bibliography of readings from the Conflict Skills Training page on www.bjrcom.com. You can take classes at local colleges and universities such as those offered at Portland State University's Professional Development Center. You can bring training on site in classroom form for your entire team or in a one-to-one coaching paradigm.

If a conflict on your team has escalated to the point where communication has broken down, it's probably time to consider bringing in a conflict consultant. You can find this kind of consultant by contacting the Oregon Mediation Association at www.omediate.org and requesting a referral to a workplace conflict specialist or by reviewing the referrals list on the Conflict Skills Training page on www.bjrcom.com.

Working with a Workplace Conflict Specialist

The personal “fit” for this kind of specialist is very important. You'll need to find someone who is conversant with cultures similar to yours and someone who can build rapport with the people in conflict quickly and easily. The Oregon Mediation Association has a comprehensive consumer guide for selecting a mediator which can be found on their web site – www.omediate.com. They offer the following five steps for selecting your mediator:

Five Steps to Choosing a Mediator

1. Decide what you want from mediation
2. Get a list of mediators
3. Look over mediator's written qualifications
4. Interview mediators
5. Evaluate information and make decision

Whatever mediator you choose, you will benefit by:

- Maintaining control over the solutions you choose – the mediator has no authority to make your decisions.
- Solving the problem - the mediator helps you think about your needs and interests, clarify your differences with the other person and helps you find common ground.
- Keeping your issues private – mediators keep the problem-solving process confidential.

Managing people in technology development environments has never been easy. The marketplace is presenting a new face to us in 2001. But the challenge managers in technology development environments face in managing conflict effectively remains. No development group can afford the costs of unmanaged conflict.

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Jean and Lisa comprise the conflict skills training and mediation services firm of Interaction Advancement.