



DEALING WITH THE VIRUS OF CONFLICT

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CONFLICTS OCCUR FREQUENTLY IN ALL TEAMS, BUT LIKE BREATHING, WE DON'T PAY MUCH ATTENTION UNTIL SOMETHING GOES WRONG

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Differences of opinion and approaches may provide the vital spark necessary for creativity and innovation, but negative conflicts are likely to prove damaging and costly, especially when a corporate team is trying to marshal its forces to complete a project.

The dividing line between constructive debate and destructive conflict is often the point at which the discussion ceases to relate to the task at hand and degenerates into personal animosity. As tempers flare, the focus shifts to the fact that team members, and key executives, can no longer stand to be in the same room together. Reason gives way to power plays and social manipulation. Eventually, the disagreement begins to infect the entire team. The most likely outcome is a damaging split that paralyzes the operation. In a worst-case scenario it may lead to the loss of valuable executive talent.

To avoid this kind of damaging outcome, it is necessary to understand how conflicts evolve and to recognize the specific stages that lead to conflict contagion. Initially most conflicts start with a difference of opinion between two members on a team. This is known as a "dyadic" relationship, one in which each person is trying to determine his position with regard to the other. If neither individual backs down, the disagreement begins to include personal and psychological factors that go beyond the original topic of conversation.

Research shows that once the conflict is initiated, it will go through three stages. The first is coalition building by the original team members who cannot agree on how to proceed. The second stage is a period in which emotional contagion infects other members of the team. The third and final stage is marked by a growing conviction by previously unaffected team members that they need to join one side or the other, either to protect their own position in the organization or to save the project's outcome.

When the argument only involves two people, it may not appear to represent a serious threat to the team as a whole. In fact, the discussion may come across as a positive exploration of fresh ways to approach the objective. At this stage, most team members are still relatively detached from the dispute, and may even be amused at the force with which their two colleagues express their opposing points of view. But as the discussion, over time, begins to deviate from a presentation based on reason and resorts to power plays and social manipulation, the exchanges become less civil. The first danger signs can be when an executive raises his voice or resorts to sarcasm, speaking to his colleague in a dismissive or condescending tone.

The indications that the conflict has entered the danger zone can be as fleeting as a response delivered in a quavering voice, or instances of yelling, slamming doors, crying or threatening to use one's larger position in the company to force a surrender. At this point, logic starts to give way to social manipulation, but other members of the team are likely to dismiss its significance, since the confrontation still only involves two of the team's members, and it does not appear to threaten the team's mission, at least not yet.

It is when the antagonists start to rally support that the contagion begins. As each antagonist recruits other team members to a coalition to support his or her side, the arguments shift to personal loyalty, friendship or simply the fact that one of the antagonists is an influential part of a team member's immediate network. Emotional contagion soon follows. The team members who join one coalition or the other begin to sense and promulgate the resentment, anger and emotions that resulted from the social manipulations that infected the original dyadic relationship. Subgroups have emerged at this point in time, and it is important to note that small co-located teams are at higher risk than large distributed teams.

As pressure intensifies, the conflict enters its third stage. Team members, who may have tried to remain above or separate from the dispute, begin to be concerned that the team's mission is at risk, or they may feel that their own status in the organization is being threatened by team failure. When neither side can overcome the other, the result is team paralysis. At this stage, even if one side wins, the losing side is likely to experience a post-conflict residue of antagonism, personal bitterness and a sense of failure. The trust that is essential to making a team operate at maximum effectiveness will have been damaged.

What can a manager do to control the situation? The first step is to remain alert to the signs of conflict contagion at the team level and to understand the dynamics of the conflict's evolutionary process. An effective manager has access to a wide range of options. He or she can change the composition of the team, or simply end the debate by making a definitive decision at a higher level, effectively outranking both antagonists and enabling them to accept a compromise decision without losing face. The important point is to recognize when a simple difference of opinion risks growing into a bitter feud that threatens to derail the team's ultimate mission. The good news is that conflicts have the potential to be solved when all members are equally involved, yet it requires a solid understanding of interpersonal conflict dynamics.

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This article is based on the award-winning paper "Conflict contagion: A temporal multi-level perspective on the development of conflict within teams," in the International Journal of Conflict Management, Vol. 4, 2013. This paper is freely downloadable from Emerald, on: <http://www.emeraldinsight.com/journals.htm?articleid=17097392>

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