

**PMEducation**

**CONFLICT MANAGEMENT**

TECHNIQUES for RESOLUTION

Conflicts are normal in Project Management. We can expect that Stakeholders will not always agree, and these disagreements can impede project progress. Most common causes of conflict are: schedules, priorities, resources, technical opinions, administrative procedures, cost, and personalities. Conflicts are usually best dealt with early, “nip it in the bud.” Left unresolved, conflicts can fester into something much bigger. As a Professional Project Manager you have the accountability for conflict resolution.

A proper conflict resolution can make the difference between a positive or a negative impact on your project. Proper conflict resolution has the added benefits of building trust and bringing new ideas.

Five techniques are available when faced with a conflict to resolve. They are summarized in the table below.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Technique | Result | For one Party | For other party |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Withdraw / Avoid | No resolution | Lose | Lose |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Smooth/ Accommodate | Emphasize agreement | Win / Lose | Win / Lose |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Compromise / Reconcile | Temporary or Partly Resolved | Lose | Lose |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Force / Direct | Dictatorship | Win | Lose |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Collaborate / Problem Solve | Working Together | Win | Win |

WITHDRAW / AVOID

This is the “do nothing” option. As stated above, a conflict not dealt with can fester into a bigger problem, so this technique is not usually advisable. However, you might choose this technique if, for example, one of the parties is leaving the organization, so the conflict has reasonable expectation of disappearing. Other times to consider this technique are when:

* the stakes are low
* the conflict is not materially affecting your project
* the Stakeholders in the conflict have Low Power (on the P-I Grid)
* tempers are hot and a “cooling down period” seems prudent

There is no winner in this technique because both parties realize nothing has improved for them. You will likely need to address the conflict sometime later.

SMOOTH / ACCOMMODATE

In this technique you find areas that the Stakeholders can agree on and emphasize those, rather than areas of difference. With this technique you try to downplay the conflict. Often conflicting parties find they have more in common than they thought. If the conflict is between you and another Stakeholder, you try to give more attention to the other party’s concerns than to your own. If this is a negotiation type of conflict, be careful not to lose your bargaining position. You might consider this technique when:

* you are very busy and do not have time to do more than agree on what you agree on
* a temporary solution will do for now
* you need to generate some good will

Although there has been some agreement, the major conflicted issues have likely not been solved. Each party feels they have won something (by what was agreeable) but lost something by not having a compete resolution. You have probably agreed to address the conflict more fully, later.

COMPROMISE / RECONCILE

In this technique, each party gives up something to the other party. If you are arbitrating two other Stakeholders, take suggestions from each side and try to find a compromising position between the two sides. This technique brings a relatively fast result and lower stress while a more permanent solution is sought. However, it does not bring trust in the long run because each party knows they had to give up something to get an agreement. The original conflict could resurface at any time.

While this should feel like a win for each side (Win/Win), more often it seems like a loss for both sides, and neither party is really happy because they have given up something to get an agreement.

FORCE / DIRECT

Whether as an arbitrator or as one of the parties, you pick one party’s viewpoint and enforce those wishes on the other party.

At the risk of seeming “heavy handed”, time constraints might favour this technique. This is the fastest technique. However, without giving due consideration to both party’s viewpoints you could miss the opportunity to gain valuable information. Also, this technique could negatively impact your relationship with Stakeholders; especially if those Stakeholders are Team Members who feel demoralized at being the other (losing) party.

Appropriate times to consider this technique are when:

* there is an emergency and immediate response is required
* prior agreement has been reached to use this technique (such as military)
* you know one party is unquestionably right
* the objecting Stakeholder has Low Power (on the P-I Grid)
* the objecting Stakeholder is just “being difficult”

As there is limited Stakeholder input, misapplication of this techniques will produce the feeling that one party wins, and one party loses.

COLLABORATE / PROBLEM SOLVE

In the Collaborate / Problem Solve technique, you let the Stakeholders know an attitude of cooperation will be required as you work together to find an acceptable solution. Discuss the issue with all interested parties. Keep and open dialogue. Then, considering the multiple viewpoints, find a solution that all can agree to. The Stakeholder participation does 2 things:

* it provides the Stakeholders a sense of ownership in the solution
* it possibly leads to a better solution than was considered by any one Stakeholder.

For most project management conflicts, this is the preferred technique for resolution. Consider this techniques especially if:

* you want to incorporate multiple view points
* the Stakeholders are High Power (on your P-I Grid)
* a consensus is required
* you want to distribute responsibility equally to all parties in the conflict

This technique is the most time consuming. However, it leads to a win / win situation where both parties feel they have come away as winners, and they have a better understanding of why they might not get everything they want.

The ROLE of the PROJECT MANAGER

As with any leadership there is never one solution for all problems. Instead as Professional Project Managers we need to adopt a flexible leadership style. Of the 5 techniques given, above, you will select which resolution technique to use for each conflict, and should get comfortable with each. A great instructional course on flexible leadership style, which has helped me tremendously, is called Situational Leadership, by Ken Blanchard and Paul Hersey. An overview of Situational Leadership is found here: <http://smallbusiness.chron.com/define-situational-leadership-2976.html>

Some graphics for Situational leadership are shown here:

<https://www.google.ca/search?q=ken+blanchard+situational+leadership+pdf&sa=X&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&ved=0ahUKEwiCuaPg2ujUAhUnxoMKHYBlBs0QsAQILw&biw=1432&bih=631&dpr=0.95>

Regardless of the technique you choose, keep the following points in mind:

* Treat each Stakeholder with dignity and respect
* If the conflict is personal and between 2 Team members, it is best handled in private
* If a disruptive conflict continues, formal disciplinary procedures may be required
* Use Active Listening, and listen with empathy
* Stay calm and rational
* Separate the issues from the personalities