

Managing Conflict in Teams

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A vital function of leadership teams is to make good decisions and then jointly lead implementation of those decisions with a high level of commitment. The idea is clear, even simple. But realizing it in action is an art born of experience and a maturity in judgment.

The practical research literature and my own professional experience with teams indicates that conflict is a critical dynamic that often determines the quality of decision making and the level of commitment that emerges from the decision-making process.

So, the question I'd like to address is: *How should a leadership team approach the decision-making process and effectively managing conflict in order to produce high-quality decisions and high levels of commitment? And what's the leader's role in this?*

Research Findings

On Conflict: Two kinds of conflict have been differentiated and studied in regard to decision making and group dynamics:

- *Cognitive Conflict* (CC) focuses on ideas and is best characterized as an energetic debate and back-and-forth aimed at finding and honing the best rational solution or strategy.
- *Affective Conflict* (AC) focuses on emotions, felt differences, and relationships, and it's been found to be counterproductive when rising to the level of anger and aggressive behavior; it then damages trust, cohesion and the overall quality of communications

Research on the relationship between CC and AC indicates that CC can be quite productive in generating high-quality decisions insofar as it is managed in a way that does not trigger the disruptive effects of AC. However, the benefits of CC quickly diminish as task-focused conflict intensifies and mutates into counterproductive AC. The most effective style of leadership for managing the relationship between CC and AC is *pragmatic leadership* (more on this below).

Less studied in the decision-making literature are the positive uses of affect and the productive effects of lower levels of AC in team deliberations. AC can energize CC (i.e., passion for an idea) and prompt assertiveness. Also, as AC intensifies and turns negative it may be diagnostic of CC gone awry. It may indicate a need to consider an option more thoroughly to examine potentially adverse consequences. AC may alert us to "reasons of the heart" (values, risk of harm, missed opportunities to increase engagement). So, AC is not inherently "bad;" it's all about how we act upon our emotional awareness.

Pragmatic Leadership: Pragmatic leadership has been defined as a style of leadership that sets a tone of reasonableness, restraining counterproductive emotions, and creating and enforcing ground rules that guide a process of "structured conflict." It moderates emotions. It relies less on stimulating emotion and more on regulating emotion. And it emphasizes regular reference to superordinate goals and the shared practical aims of the team. By doing so, it reminds us of why we're here, our *raison d'être*.

When leaders practice this style of leadership they're attuned to their moods and emotions. And it helps them notice emotional shifts and the moods of others, which signal needs to moderate the intensity of interaction. Leaders do this by expressing affective qualities of presence, verbally and nonverbally, setting a tone that calms others, an "emotional contagion" of composure and reasonableness. It's a

temperate expression of emotions, and respectful observations of the emotional dynamics in the room that lead to more open, unguarded, safe, and authentic communication.

Ground rules help specify expectations. When the leader models and enforces these norms, it tends to reduce the frequency and the intensity of AC. Examples are provided below.

This leadership style, and the presence of legitimate rules and fair enforcement of the rules, reduces the perceived need to escalate conflict in order to be heard. The active and ongoing role of the leader and others in acknowledging and enforcing the ground rules reduces the level of frustration that can otherwise build in less structured modes of CC.

Examples of Ground Rules

- Listen to others respectfully, indicating a sincere and active interest in understanding them without interruption or cynical comments.
- When you fail to see the point of others' arguments, assume that there is more that you need to understand and seek clarification.
- Critique ideas without criticizing the person, doing so in the spirit of helping others clarify their ideas, using their words, looking for their positive potential.
- Challenge others' assumptions without challenging their integrity, intelligence, or motives; again, seek to understand, assume positive intent.
- Normalize the experience of frustration and emotional arousal, make it okay to recognize it, and identify the source true source of frustration rather than making misattributions.
- Recognize the social systems rule: *We all have a role in creating the problematic dynamics of the current state, and we are all responsible for generating solutions.*

Research Supports Pragmatic Leadership

When a pragmatic style of leadership is used to structure conflicts, the relationship between CC and AC is moderated as indicated in the graphical model below. In this model, BI represents *behavioral integration*, i.e., the skilled use of pragmatic leadership practices to structure conflict.

Behavioral integration (BI) consists in conditions of high trust, interdependency, goal clarity, free and timely sharing of information, collaborative working relationships on projects, and a proven capacity to make high-quality decisions and to approach implementation with a high level of commitment.

