

Conflict in Teams

Conflict is a common occurrence in teams. We often hear that the responsibility to create positive team culture within organisations lies with leaders and HR departments.

Although this is somewhat true, as leaders and HR teams are focused on delivering results through people, every employee is responsible for reducing the impact that conflict has on the psychological well-being on self and others.

Conflict in teams often leads to a negative ripple effect throughout an organisation. Anyone who has been a part of a dysfunctional team will understand the sense of frustration, disharmony, loss of productivity and poor outcomes which result from people struggling to work together.

Defining conflict at work

Conflict itself can be defined as an antagonistic interaction, in which one team member tries to block the actions or decisions of another.

In general, there are two basic types of team conflict, substantive and emotional.

Substantive conflicts (sometimes called task) arise over things such as goals, tasks, and the allocation of resources. For example, when deciding how to track a project, a software engineer may want to use a specific software program for its user interface and customisation capabilities. The project manager, on the other hand, may want to use a different program for its detailed reports. Conflict will arise if neither party is willing to compromise on his/her position.

Emotional conflicts (relationships) arise from things such as jealousy, insecurity, annoyance, envy, or personality conflicts. Emotional conflict is when two people find themselves holding opposing viewpoints and have difficulty hiding their personal animosity. Different working styles are also a common cause of emotional conflicts. For example, Julia may need peace and quiet to concentrate, but her colleague swears that playing music stimulates his creativity. Both end up frustrated if they can't reach a workable resolution. Source: ER Services

Sources of conflict in teams

There are many sources of conflict and tension within teams. Poor communication is often the source of misunderstandings along with mismatched values. Values influence decision-making and cause individuals to summon up energy to preserve their beliefs. Values determine how people, behaviour and events are viewed.

Psychological biases can also lead to conflict in teams. Individuals will bring their own biases into teams, such as the confirmation bias, an unconscious act of referencing only those perspectives that confirm pre-existing views.

Conflict in teams is further complicated by an individual's work preferences. These preferences bring value in diversity to the team and when not understood and appreciated by others conflict can arise.

Conflict is not a dirty word

Not all conflict is negative. Team conflicts can also produce positive results when the conflict centres on real substantiated issues, sparking new ideas and creativity.

Alternatively, when people feel they cannot disagree or offer different opinions, new ideas cannot emerge. **Groupthink** is the mindset that develops when people put too much value on team consensus and harmony. It is common when individuals are afraid to go against what most group members—especially dominant members—think. Some degree of conflict helps teams avoid groupthink and forces the group to make choices based on rational decision making.

If there is too much cooperation, the best ideas may never get shared and team effectiveness is sacrificed for the sake of efficiency. For the same reasons that diversity bestows benefits on a workforce, a mix of ideas and opinions improves team performance and decision making. If there is too much conflict, however, then nothing can get done.



The Team Management Profile

As teams develop, they are faced with varying degrees of harmony and conflict based on many factors. One of these factors is the unique work preferences an individual brings to a team. In other words, the type of work they like to do and how they prefer to go about this work.

The TMS Team Management Profile (TMP) provides a well-researched, simple, practical lens for individuals and teams to come together and understand their work preferences.

The TMP is about learning, not just assessment. It identifies eight core activities (Types of Work Wheel), mapped against four work preference measures (RIDO Scale) which combine to create an individual's unique Team Management Profile. The advantages of understanding a team member's Profile include:

1. Being able to identify a person's strengths and work preferences
2. A greater self-awareness and strategies to improve performance
3. Helping people understand why they work the way they do
4. Providing a common language for teams to communicate with
5. Enabling leaders to successfully and confidently assign people to projects and tasks
6. Delivering objective, constructive and work-focused insights

The TMP provides the knowledge required to improve work performance at an individual and team level. When teams achieve a higher level of connection between their work preferences and job demands – it increases the team's energy, enthusiasm, commitment and motivation and reduces the potential for substantive and relationship conflicts.

When conflict goes well

Isaiah and Lila work as chemical engineers for a large oil company. Together they are responsible for the delivery of a major project, with strict budget and completion deadlines.

Whilst they get along professionally, the pair have differing preferences and at times this causes conflict. Lila's preference is to make things happen, she is very analytical in her decision making and loves working

to a structured plan. At times Lila will move forward on actions without considering people's input and feelings. Whereas Isaiah is patient with routine, he loves to gather information and can detect conflict even before it happens. He can, at times, procrastinate about decisions and hold up project progress. Now that the project is becoming more complex and timelines are looming conflict is starting to increase between Lila and Isaiah.

As Lila is thrusting forward to complete project timelines, she feels that Isaiah is taking too long to make decisions because he must explore every piece of information available to him, she calls this his *analysis paralysis*. On the other hand, Isaiah finds Lila impulsive and feels as though she doesn't take the time to stop and think of the implications of her decisions on the project outcomes. He says she is reckless, and this begins to start conflict within the wider team.

To help Lila and Isaiah understand how they could work best together they completed a TMP. What they uncovered was:

- Lila prefers analytical decision making and Isaiah prefers beliefs-based decision making. Through understanding each other's decision-making preferences the pairs communication improved significantly. Lila prioritised actively seeking others opinions prior to making decisions and Isaiah started to be more goal orientated and move into action at a faster pace. This in turn resulted in reduced conflict and increased productivity.
- They could disagree and work through their differences with a common language provided by the TMP.
- They understood each other's work preferences and made a conscious effort to understand and appreciate each other's way of working.

Conclusion

Recognising that people have preferred ways of working is the key message behind the Team Management Profile. Encouraging diversity and minimising and resolving conflict will have a positive impact on the psychological well-being of individuals and in return increasing business performance.

If you are operating in an environment where your teams or clients are seeking improved team effectiveness, greater understanding of team dynamics and opportunities for improvement, this simple and easy to implement Profile is affordable, agile and results drive.



Want to know more? Contact **Team Management Systems**

P: +61 (0)7 3368 2041 | **E:** info@tmsoz.com | **W:** www.tmsoz.com