

EECS 541 Computer Engineering Capstone

Conflict Resolution

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Conflict

- Conflict is a form of interaction among parties that differ in interest, perception, and preferences.
 - *Kolb, David A., Osland, Joyce S., and Rubin, Irwin M., Organizational behavior: An experiential approach, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 6th Edition.*
- Conflict arises from the clash of perceptions, goals, or values in an arena where people care about the outcome
 - *Alessandra, Tony Ph.D. & Hunsaker, Phil Ph.D. (1993) Communicating at Work. New York: Fireside Publishers.*

Conflicts

- Conflicts are common and inevitable
 - team members have different backgrounds, personalities, and experiences
 - leading to different opinions, insights, and ideas
 - some conflicts may be hard to resolve, and may linger for a long time
- Conflicts are not necessarily disruptive or negative
 - may force discussions and better understanding on complex issues
- Conflicts should be resolved quickly and effectively
 - conflict resolution skills needs to be learned
 - needs interpersonal skills (in addition to technical expertise)
- Conflict management and resolution is critical to team harmony and productivity.

Conflict Causes – Examples

- Disagreements in the technical approach
- Intolerance for mistakes
- Lack of trust
- Differences in objectives and different understanding of productive work
- Disagreements about needs, goals, priorities, and interests
- Different cultures, values, attitudes, languages, and perceptions
- Team members failing to meet their assigned tasks on time or rigor
- Poor communication
- Lack of clarity in roles and responsibilities

Conflict Categories in a Team

- Design Decision
 - problems making project-related decisions, including goals, scope, tasks, etc.
- (Perception of) workload imbalance
 - some team members may be doing more or less work
- Capability deficiency
 - some team members may lack the necessary skills to complete the given task
- Personality
 - differing personalities may make it difficult to get along
- Miscommunication
 - failure to understand other members, failure to communicate and share information

Conflict Management Strategies -- Competition

- One party forces their own view concern despite resistance
 - forces one viewpoint over another
 - may involve aggressive, uncooperative and autocratic behavior
- Pros
 - can result in quick problem resolution
 - can increase individual authority and self-worth
- Cons
 - may cause animosity with other team members
 - may cause new conflicts later
- Results in a “win-lose” situation
 - but, may be the only option in certain cases for the project manager

Conflict Management Strategies – Compromise

- Both parties come to a mutually agreeable “compromise” by a give and take approach.
- Pros
 - may result in a less confrontational and quick resolution
 - can be a temporary “fix” until a better approach can be found
- Cons
 - both parties may feel unsatisfied later
 - not the best approach to building good relations between team members
 - requires enforcing the implementation of the “compromise” solution
- A win-lose or lose-lose situation may be created
 - more appropriate for minor or less important project issues

Conflict Management Strategies – Avoidance

- One party surrenders the issue to avoid negotiating/discussing the issue.
 - individual is unassertive and/or uncooperative
- Pros
 - may avoid heated discussions and further tension
 - allows other more important or higher-priority tasks to resume
- Cons
 - the winning party may view this as agreement to their opinion
 - may cause tension in peer-relationships if used often
- A lose-win situation is created
 - again more useful for trivial or less-important matters

Conflict Management Strategies – Smoothing

- Dealing with other party's concerns before addressing your own
 - also called accommodation. The person may be unassertive and cooperative
 - used when one person is a domain expert or have a bigger vested interest
- Pros
 - can lead to improved relationships by deferring to the expert's opinion
 - can help individual focus on and protect other areas
- Cons
 - one party may take advantage, and the other may face a loss in confidence
 - the winning party may feel that the other is being too condescending
- May create a win-lose situation

Conflict Management Strategies – Collaboration

- Conflicting parties discuss, work together, and reach agreement on a new idea that compiles both views
 - conflict may be more passive, and individuals are uncertain of the best approach and willing to discuss and resolve
 - individuals are assertive and cooperative
- Pros
 - less chance of future conflicts on this issue
 - leads to better mutual understanding and better team relationships
 - enforces collaborative climate in the team
- Cons
 - needs more commitment to solve the problem
- Only strategy that has a win-win resolution

Increasing Collaboration

- “XYZ” model of conflict resolution
 - describes conflict in terms of behavior, consequences, and responses:
 - when you do X (a behavior), Y (consequences) happen, and then I do Z (personal response)
- For example,
 - X = “When you are late to meetings”
 - Y = “decisions are being made without your input”
 - Z = “and my response is frustration and wanting to quit the team”
- Such discussions may help resolve conflicts.

Handling Deadlocks

- When conflict causes work to cease
 - ignoring the conflict is no longer an option
- Strategies
 - each group can debate from the other's point of view to better understand all issues
 - try to find a common ground by analyzing both sides of the argument
 - debate each opinion. For less critical issues, toss a coin to move on.

Negotiation to Find Common Ground

- It is important to believe that there is a solution to the conflict
 - else, reaching once will be hard
 - negotiation can help find the common ground
- Story
 - father left 17 camels for his three sons
 - eldest son to get half of the 17 camels
 - middle son to get $\frac{1}{3}$ rd camels
 - youngest to get $\frac{1}{9}$ th of the camels
 - is division possible?

References

- Conflict Resolution in Engineering Project Teams
 - NSF BESTEAMS project
- conflict Resolution in Project Management
 - <https://programsuccess.wordpress.com/2013/08/01/conflict-resolution-in-project-management/>
- The Engineering Capstone Course: Fundamentals for Students and Instructors
 - by Harvey F. Hoffman, Springer