

Facilitation Skills – the Key to Conflict Resolution

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Longer hours, greater stress and shorter tempers all contribute to increased conflict. As a project manager, you need to expect increased conflict during these troubled times and be prepared to intervene when necessary. Conflict occurs within a project environment for a variety of reasons: Project participants represent diverse disciplines and functional areas—and therefore bring different agendas to the table. Project managers often lack authority over project team members. Consequently, they may be frustrated in their efforts to get work done. Project player roles may be ambiguous. Key project goals may not have been agreed upon. Functional areas may feel that their “turf” is being threatened or undermined. And these are only the obvious potential sources of conflict in a project environment.

As influence is the key skill that is used in negotiation, facilitation is the primary skill used in conflict resolution. In the context of this article, facilitation is the process of moving two factions with different points of view toward an amenable resolution. The factions can be two (or more) people or two (or more) groups who disagree and cannot resolve the disagreement amongst themselves. The person who intervenes to help move the factions to some resolution need not be an outside facilitator. We are assuming that the person intervening is a member of the project community having a direct relationship to the project and the project players involved.

There are ways that you, as a project manager, can better facilitate these discussions and coach the project players who report to you on dealing with conflict situations more professionally.

The Process

There are four steps to the facilitation process.

1. **Setting the Ground Rules:** Within every conflict, there are task issues and emotional issues. Let the parties know that the task issues will be addressed first and the social (emotional/political) issues second. Also restate the basic rules of the meeting; these might include instructions about not interrupting each other, time limits for speaking, etc.

2. **Addressing Task/Process Issues:** Facilitate the discussion so that each person (faction) has an opportunity to verbalize what he/she sees as the conflict point(s). Require each participant to take responsibility for their part of the problem while making no judgments. Encourage the parties to talk to one another, not to you. Take the opportunity to point out any possibility of resolution as brought up by any of the parties. Do not allow the discussion to migrate to the social issues—not yet.

3. **Addressing Social/Political Issues:** When the “problem” has been clearly articulated by each party and possible solution(s) to the task/process issue(s) have been thrown out for consideration, allow the conversation to move to the emotional issues surrounding the conflict. Keep it focused on the issue—not personalities. Do not allow he-said/she-said to become a part of the discussion. Also avoid going down a rat hole with long specific stories and examples of who did what to whom. Restate resolution suggestions offered by any of the parties.

Note: The crux of most conflict emanates from one of these three places:

- Respect
- Control
- Turf

Listen for which of those is the focal point and drill down until all parties see the underlying core of the disagreement.

4. **Closing:** Once tentative resolution has been reached, ask these questions of all parties. What are you going to give to and what are you going to get from the other person? What can I (the facilitator) do to help? What can anyone else in the room do to help? Are both of you OK? (If the answer is no, keep going until they are OK or until everyone agrees not to be OK but to move on.) What will it look like, sound like, and/or feel like when it is working? What is the timeframe for a checkpoint to be sure that the agreement(s) is being met (either just between the parties or with the facilitator involved)?

The role of the facilitator is one of quiet yet strong direction amongst the parties involved. The facilitator is not there to solve the problem but to help the involved parties solve their own problem.

Pitfalls

There are a variety of pitfalls that a person new to the role of facilitator can fall into.

1. Don't get enticed into taking one side over another.
2. Don't get emotional yourself. When you start losing control, the rest of the parties will follow suit.
3. If you have already made up your mind as to how you want the conflict to be resolved, either state it up front or remove yourself as the facilitator. Once the parties see that you are biased, you will lose your credibility as the facilitator.
4. If you are attempting to be both the facilitator and also must have input to the discussion, change your physical posture depending upon which role you are taking. For example, while you are standing, you are the facilitator. When you move to another part of the room and sit down with the rest of the parties, you are presenting your personal point of view.
5. Do not over control or under control the conversation. This is not easy to accomplish. It will probably take much practice to attain this balance.

Today with fewer resources and equal or more work to accomplish, project players are being pushed to their limits setting up a ripe environment for added conflict. A positive intervention on the part of a facilitator can alleviate the pressure and resolve the problem. A negative intervention can exacerbate the problem. Therefore, all of us need to do some homework as to how to be better facilitators. One thing we should be sure to remember: As a facilitator during a conflict resolution session, we are not the sage on stage, we are the guide on the side.