CHAPTER 12: DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP AND MANAGING CONFLICT

Chapter outline

- Developing a leadership structure
- Managing team conflicts

To get your team to the "performing" stage described in Chapter 11, you need to develop an effective leadership structure and learn how to confront and manage conflicts productively.

12.1 DEVELOPING A LEADERSHIP STRUCTURE

Whereas in industry, team leaders are assigned by management, in EDC the team must decide which leadership structure works best for them. In general, this structure takes one of three forms:

- Shared leadership

  Team members who decide to share leadership tend to be self-motivated and comfortable taking charge of a particular aspect of a project. One member may be responsible for prototyping, another for user and client interactions, and a third for written deliverables.

- Rotating leadership

  This model works well when team members have time constraints at different points in the project. Rotating leadership also is a good choice for teams with members who have strong personalities and are reluctant to give leadership over to one person. One EDC team rotated leadership when members recognized that their relationships and quality of work were deteriorating. One member directed activities during the testing phase, another during the design review phase, and a third during the preparations for the final presentation.

- Single-person leadership

  This model works well when one member is good at managing, motivating, and communicating with his or her teammates or when sharing leadership is causing confusion about roles, missed deadlines, and poor communication.

  As one student commented, “I learned that it is necessary to not be afraid to be a leader. If you feel like your team is falling apart, it is essential that you step up and take charge when the rest of the team needs you the most.” Another student found that his team faltered without his leadership: “I was the one running all the meetings, setting up times, and calling people. One week when I was out of town, my team forgot to meet. While this was very frustrating, it made me realize that I really did hold the leadership role in my group. While this took up a lot more of my time, I also found it was rather rewarding when the team functioned to produce a final product.”

  However, when one person is acting as the leader, it’s important for him or her to also be a good team member and to avoid being bossy. Good leadership involves following the guidelines below.

When your team hits the storming stage, discuss whether leadership—or lack thereof—is causing problems, and then choose a form of leadership that suits members’ personalities and needs.

12.1.1 Guidelines for exercising effective leadership

As a leader, you should:

1. Assign tasks based on members’ interests and skills. People work harder and produce better results when their work matches their talents.
2. Trust team members. Some leaders lose trust in members whose work they think isn’t up to par and take it upon themselves to redo the work. This can cause resentment and infighting, so it’s best to learn to trust the members of your team. One team leader with a “need for control” said he made a conscious effort to resist his desire to take a finished product from a team member, alter it, and turn it in: “I often have an impulse to do this, but I know it is irritating for team members and not in the collaborative spirit, so I have tried not to.” Another team leader had a similar experience: “I don’t like when I feel like I am not on top of the situation, and I am a little uncomfortable in trusting others to do a quality job on something. However, I have become much more confident in team members’ work and have micromanaged less. In both quarters, my increase in trust made the team run more smoothly and be less testy.”
3. Work toward consensus. Some leaders try to push their decisions on team members rather than help them reach a consensus. But that can only back-

fire. As one wise student leader put it, “Team goals should be set with as much input from each team member as possible because people are more likely to complete a task if they have influenced the decision-making process that led to the task.”

4. Encourage communication. First, email members regularly to tell them what you are doing and what the team needs to do. One team leader states that in his first quarter of EDC he “sent out scores of emails to teammates.” He notes the problems that resulted in the second quarter when he “did not send out emails at important times when they were needed”: “There were a few times when one team member and I would make a discovery, plan, or decision without properly consulting with or informing the third team member.” That third teammate became resentful and felt he had wasted time on his assigned tasks. Second, encourage communication by leading meetings effectively. See the following chapter for a discussion of how to conduct meetings. Third, help the team identify and resolve conflicts. As one team leader learned by hard experience, “Throughout the eleven-week quarter, team dynamic problems that are not addressed directly are difficult to resolve and it is difficult to regroup the team.”

12.2 MANAGING TEAM CONFLICTS

Team conflict is inevitable, even when members’ interests and strengths are well-matched. In fact, some conflict within a team can be a positive thing because it shows that team members are considering very different approaches to their design. A successful team performs well not because it has no conflicts, but because it has learned how to manage them.

Here are the three main sources of team conflict. (NOTE: These examples are real, but the names have been changed.)

1. Differences of opinion about goals and decisions. One EDC team couldn’t agree about the solution to its design project. Joanne, Nelson, and Stacy felt the team should take a conservative approach and modify an existing device because of members’ lack of time and knowledge about mechanical engineering. Vera felt they owed it to the client and themselves to take a more experimental approach and develop innovative designs. Until they resolved their conflict, they failed to make progress.
2. Differences in personality and working style. Ann, who was extroverted and outspoken, thought Greg’s reticent personality would weaken the team’s presentations to the instructors and client. Greg felt Ann was focusing too much on the presentations and not enough on the technical aspects of the project. They resolved their conflict by discussing how each person's personality and working style could contribute to the team's success and then dividing up more of their work..
3. Perceptions that members are not fulfilling their responsibilities. Three members of an EDC team were frustrated with the fourth member, who

didn’t do the work he had agreed to. They tried talking to him, but nothing helped until the three members met with their instructors and maturely worked out a solution to the problem that enabled them to move forward on the project. It’s important not to let one person who doesn’t participate derail the project as a whole.

12.2.1 Guidelines for managing conflict

1. When your team is having conflicts over goals and decisions, shift the focus from what team members want to why they want it.

   As management consultant Maureen O'Brien (1995) states:

   > When we become emotionally invested in getting what we want, we often lose sight of why we want it—and the reason we want anything is to satisfy a need. One of the secrets to resolving conflict is to find out what people need. It's very possible to satisfy a person’s or a group’s needs without necessarily giving them what they claim they want.

   The above-mentioned team, who were split over whether to take a conservative or innovative approach to their design, resolved their conflict by discussing their needs rather than defending their positions. Joanne, Nelson, and Stacy—the “conservative” members—needed to feel they wouldn’t jeopardize their grades by adopting a risky approach. Vera needed to express her creativity by choosing a more experimental design. To meet the needs of both sides, their instructors suggested a three-part approach: (1) The team would generate conservative and innovative alternatives, which the instructors reassured them would help their grade. (2) Members would analyze the alternatives and choose the one that best fit client and user needs. (3) The team would then produce a design based on the chosen alternative: a prototype if it was “conservative” and CAD drawings if it was “innovative.” With the conflict resolved to everyone's satisfaction, the team was able to move ahead creatively and productively.

2. When you have a problem with a team member’s personality or working style:

   a. Decide what you can and can't change.

      “He talks non-stop.” “She's always so late.” “When will he quit mumbling so I can understand him?” “I wish she'd quit being so negative.” “Just because he has computer programming experience, he thinks he knows everything.”

      If you decide the person can’t, or won’t, change, figure out what you want to accomplish in the long run. For example, if the person’s “problem” is low participation due to reticence, get him or her to participate by having everyone on the team come to the next meeting

with one idea for each agenda item, have team members email ideas to each other, or have each member speak on an agenda item at a meeting. Approach the conflict the same way you approach design problems: identify the real problem, generate alternative solutions, and choose those that best address the problem.

b. Use members' personality and working style to their best advantage.

   The EDC team mentioned earlier with Anne, the extrovert, and Greg, the serious-minded, came to realize that each was doing necessary work. Greg's drawings would provide evidence for the presentations that Ann was preparing. And Carla, the third member, would coordinate the efforts of the team.

c. Decide when and where to discuss the conflict.

   Your decisions will depend on the nature of the conflict, the personalities involved, and the goal to be accomplished. In some situations, a formal team meeting is the ideal setting. In others, it's over coffee or in your instructor's office.

d. State explicitly that you want to discuss the problem.

   Being direct, rather than beating around the bush, helps you to focus the discussion and prepares the person to listen. Remember to be tactful and to listen.

e. Precisely describe the irritating behavior and when it occurred.

   Avoid generalizing and name-calling. Insults will only make your teammate feel defensive, hostile, and less willing to resolve the problem. Instead, try a more objective and less accusatory approach.

   – Begin by stating facts:

     "When I suggested a format for the user survey, you said it would never work. At the last meeting, when I suggested we interview our client again to nail down the problem, you said that was ridiculous because the problem was already clear. And at the same meeting, you laughed when I said we needed to do more research." These examples give each of you something specific to work from and demonstrate that your reactions derive not from imagined slights but from actual incidents.

   – Next, explain how the behavior affects you and the team.

     In the situation above, you might say, "I'm to the point where I no longer want to contribute ideas during our meetings because I worry about being embarrassed by having them put down. That means we might lose out on some potentially good ideas.

Besides, it's going to make everyone uncomfortable if I just sit here saying nothing during meetings." Explaining the behavior's consequences gives everyone a stake in reaching a resolution.

– Finally, offer a suggestion.

In the situation above, you might say, "I'd like you to hear me out when I have something to say. And if you disagree, then I'd like you to be specific about which part you don't like and why." Sometimes you might not know what to suggest. In that case, propose that you work together to reach a resolution so the problem doesn't stand in the way of the team's progress.

3. When someone tells you he or she has a problem with your behavior:
   a. Try not to get defensive. Although it's hard to hold back or refrain from challenging the facts, keep in mind that being defensive makes it harder to resolve the problem. Instead, ask your teammate what is causing him or her to feel this way toward you.
   b. Paraphrase what you heard the person say. This helps clarify the problem and puts you in the proper frame of mind to reach a resolution.
   c. Comment on the suggestion your teammate offers. Can you act on the suggestion? If not, what are some alternatives to resolving the conflict?
   d. Offer explanatory facts if appropriate; for instance, "I've been late because my supervisor at work has asked me to work extra hours, so maybe we should talk about shifting our meetings to a time that's good for all of us."
4. When conflicts arise from the perception that some team members are not doing their fair share of work, try the following.
   a. Find out through discussion whether you're correct in thinking these members are not doing their fair share.

      Occasionally the team member is doing the work, but others don't see it that way. In the case of the introvert and extrovert, Greg and Ann saw each other as less hard-working because neither understood the value of the work the other person was doing. They needed to appreciate the contributions both were making to the project.

   b. When it becomes apparent that one or more team members are not doing their fair share, the rest of the team has two options: (1) discuss a fair way to assign responsibilities; (2) ask your instructors to intervene.

      In one EDC class, three team members worked hard while one, George, did very little. When he failed to follow through on new tasks he agreed to do, even at the persuasion of his instructors, his team members decided that worrying about him was distracting them from

the project. After consulting with their instructors, they divided the work among themselves, started having fun, and developed an outstanding design.

If George had behaved this way on a job, he would have been transferred, or even fired. In EDC, those are not options. But because teamwork is required, George received a low grade for failing to cooperate with his team.

12.2.2 Tools for managing team conflicts

EDC offers two formal tools to evaluate how well a team performs and to identify problems.

- Team process checks. These provide an opportunity for the team as a whole to take stock of its effectiveness and make necessary improvements. Process checks also give team members a chance to raise issues they believe are important to the team's success. You'll be asked to rate the team on the following criteria:
  1. All team members are committed to the project and believe it is worthwhile.
  2. The team has clear, written standards for team performance and uses them.
  3. The work is divided fairly among team members, and all team members are contributing.
  4. The team has an effective communication system that keeps all team members fully informed.
  5. The team is working well with faculty and is getting the support it needs.
  6. The team is happy with the quality of work it is producing.

Problem areas are identified in one of two ways: (a) everyone on the team rates the team low on a certain criteria, or (b) there is a significant difference in team members' perceptions. An online form for submitting and reviewing process checks is available on the EDC Course Management System website.

- Peer reviews. These provide an opportunity to assess your own and your teammates' contributions to aspects of the project. They also allow you to compare your assessment of yourself with your teammates' assessment of you. In a successful EDC team, each team member makes a substantial contribution to the overall work of the team. An online form is available on the EDC Blackboard site; it will ask you to evaluate yourself and each teammate, rating to what degree that person:
  1. is committed to the team's overall goal
  2. steps up and shows initiative

3. helps organize tasks and keeps the project on schedule
4. can be relied on to finish tasks on time and do high quality work
5. attends meetings on time and is totally prepared
6. stays focused on the task during meetings and contributes useful ideas
7. listens attentively to others and is open to their ideas and opinions
8. participates actively in resolving team issues and making team decisions

After your team has submitted its peer reviews using the online form, you will be able to review your self-ratings and compare them to the average of your teammates' ratings for you on each characteristic. If you rate low in any area, or if there is a substantial difference between your self-perception and your teammates' perceptions of you, it is your responsibility to discuss this with the team. Your instructors also have access to the process check and peer review responses and may guide your team through a discussion if they see areas for concern.

12.3 REFERENCES

O'Brien, M. (1995). *Who's got the ball? (and other nagging questions about team life)*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.