

Mini-Tutorial
Saving Struggling Quality Teams
OPERMGT380
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INTRODUCTION

Saving struggling quality teams is a task that can take time, energy, and training. A team is a group of individuals working to achieve a goal with activities requiring close coordination. (Foster, 461) When any group of individuals begin working towards a goal, conflict will occur. Any team, quality or not, requires that its members and its leadership be well trained in dealing with conflict, since conflict; is the underlying reason that any team is struggling. How the team deals with conflict will dictate how well they will be able to perform their tasks and complete their objectives. Much of how the team deals with conflict will come from company policies, their leader's skills and their own training.

TOOL DEFINED

A quality team, more defined, is a small group from between 5-10 people (Forsythe) who are trying to find solutions to an aspect of their company's quality that can be improved upon. The close coordination of a quality team requires the team have a well-trained facilitator to lead the group. This leader will have been trained, have had experience finding the true source of a groups troubles, and then being able to find constructive modes to solve the problem.

An ideal quality team will have a clear set of objectives, a good facilitator, include members from all areas impacted by the objective, be void of conflict, able to identify the real issues surrounding the problem, discover a viable solution to the problem, and closure or a distinct end to the process. Creating an ideal quality team is an unattainable goal, people are not perfect and in situations that involve groups something is sure to go wrong.

Many things can go wrong when it comes to quality teams, or teams in general. The objectives of the group may not be defined well enough, causing the team to disagree on the route they should take when solving a perceived problem. There could be a lack of resources

that create tension between group members and the leadership. If a team comes to multiple solutions to the problem, and can't agree on which solution should be implemented first, conflict will occur. Finally, with any group, interpersonal conflict is bound to be present, too many personalities in one room, or on one project, requires training to constructively overcome. There are many reasons, too numerous to list, why teams will struggle or come into conflict. The best approach is to know that conflict does exist and can be dealt with constructively and with successful results.

Conflict is technically defined as an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from others in achieving goals. (Hocker & Wilmont, 41-48) Most problems with any conflict is the perception that a person could be damaged in the conflict, either by not achieving their goal or by losing some portion of a resource they feel they need more of. Since conflict is mainly about perceptions and how people deal with perceptions, there are some generally held truths about conflict (Kerzner, 381-383):

- Conflicts are inevitable.
- Conflicts can occur between anyone.
- Conflicts can occur over anything.
- Conflicts can repeat themselves over and over again.
- Conflicts are part of change.
- Conflicts will never go away.

With all of the above list being true, people need to be aware of the negative impacts conflict can have on individuals and in teams.

Conflict can spiral out of control in two ways; one is an escalatory spiral and the other is an avoidance spiral. When an escalatory spiral occurs, some bad (perceived) behavior is turned into a perception of another, which adds to the perception of the relationship. After each cycle the members involved begin to feel worse about the other party, losing trust, or faith, in the

other to perform their jobs efficiently. In an avoidance spiral a person will begin to avoid another, rather than confront the conflict they perceive. The conflict will begin to spiral as feelings are hurt worse and make the person involved grow more upset over the unresolved conflict, leading to a total breakdown in communication and the dragging down of other individual team members and the team itself. (Hocker & Wilmot, 51-55)

Conflict within a group can also be a positive for the decision making process, if handled correctly. Conflict brings problems to light that need to be resolved and can form stronger bonds between the members of the team, when it is handled effectively. Conflict can actually serve to clarify the goals of the team and clear out any resentments others may have. Conflict can also increase the understanding of the team as a whole. (Hocker & Wilmot, 15-16) Productive conflict is a byproduct of a well-trained team, facilitator and good company policy towards conflict resolution.

When a team is formed, the facilitator needs to conduct a comprehensive launch that will provide training for the team members. The facilitator will also guide the team in setting norms that will allow the team a reference point for what is expected of each member. The facilitator will use feedback from team members, and between members, to identify potential problems with the team, before large-scale conflict arises. The facilitator, before showing up for the first meeting, will have been trained themselves for the task of leading and managing a team. The facilitator will have established a their own personal norms on how to deal with conflict within the group. They will know how to define the group, discourage disruptive behavior, ensure contribution from all members, guide the team, and how to manage conflict. (Burns)

The team and the facilitator need to be trained in dealing with conflict, but that process does not just happen on its own. The company must first have an established interest-based,

conflict resolution-based system in place for them to follow. The company must allow the team members and the facilitators the power to solve their conflicts through problem solving and mediation, simply choosing winners and losers is not the best way to handle conflict situations. A company that designs a flow of communication when individuals or teams are in conflict let the individuals involved know that the company and the facilitator support them and want to find the best solutions to the conflict. Training the employees and real company support are key to a functional conflict-resolution system. (Cloke & Goldsmith)

EXAMPLE, REAL LIFE

Since 1992 the Wisconsin Department of Employment Relations and the state's largest labor union, the 27,000-member Wisconsin State Employees Union, have successfully used "consensus bargaining," in dealing with contract negotiations. The state of Wisconsin and the labor union had used the traditional form of labor bargaining in the past, each side getting what they wanted out of the deal with little regard for the other party. The traditional form of bargaining produced a great deal of conflict, characterized by frequent and lengthy impasses, a grievance backlog that reached 1,400 arbitration cases and a public and political leadership that was losing patience with the process. These negative aspects caused the state and the union to come to an agreement on one aspect, the negotiations were not working.

They created a cooperative problem-solving approach that contrasted sharply with the traditional adversarial approach to bargaining. Consensus bargaining focuses on identifying and meeting bargainer's interests and creating a positive and constructive basis for discussions. It involves commitment to the process, from both sides. The negotiators must be candid throughout the bargaining process and have to realize that reaching an agreement on a contract is

the beginning, not the end of creating a cooperative relationship. Open communication and training are key to both parties being satisfied with the outcome.

This problem-solving approach has created a cooperative labor-management relationship in Wisconsin, reduced bargaining time, stimulated creative new contract provisions and helped develop a more positive and closer labor-management relationship. (Beil & Litscher)

This example is one that shows when both parties were willing to see each others actual goals, instead of their perceived goals, conflict can be managed productively. It set up a system that both sides could use to better their individual situations. It also helped them to see what needed to happen when conflict did occur.

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