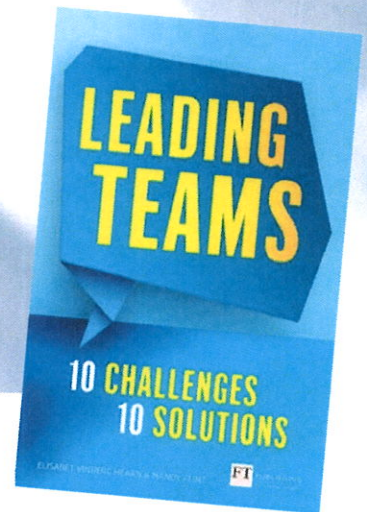


WAVING THE WHITE FLAG



In busy schools where everyone's working at full capacity, moments of conflict are often unavoidable. In this extract from *Leading Teams – 10 Challenges: 10 Solutions*, **MANDY FLINT** and **ELISABET VINBERG HEARN** explore why tension occurs and look at how best to diffuse potentially fraught situations

Conflict is simply a difference of opinion. An opinion in and of itself is neither good nor bad. It's the interpretation that could create a negative sense of conflict. Here are the top reasons for conflict and tension in teams:

LACK OF COMMUNICATION

When they are not given enough information, people will fill in the gaps and make it up, even if they don't know that they are making it up. The mind is quick to piece together any bits of data, no matter how small, and make up its own story. Each person is different from the next, so we build our own story uniquely, if we haven't been given the whole picture.

Another communication issue is when people do not communicate their thoughts and concerns, which could provide the clarification they need to avoid a sense of conflict.

PERSONAL DIFFERENCE

As mentioned before, everyone is unique and it's important to understand how that creates differences in teams. If a person doesn't understand another team member and his/her personal needs and values, they look at his/her opinion and behaviours as flawed as they don't match the person's own view. Truly stepping into somebody else's shoes and seeing things from their angle is not an easy task. The pace and speed at which we operate doesn't always allow us to be in the moment to be able to do that. So this is an understandable challenge we all face, but that's not an excuse for not doing it.

CONFLICTING GOALS

If team members have different goals, ie. goals that for some reason don't support each other, then their priorities will differ and they will not see the importance of the other person's task. This creates conflict or at least tension.

COMPETITIVE BEHAVIOURS

When roles are unclear, people end up doing the same things as other team members because it's not clear who owns what and therefore who is supposed to do what. This in turn makes people feel like they are competing for the task and conflict is almost guaranteed, especially if communication is lacking.

Conflict arises from the idea that something is either right or wrong, which in turn means that when opinions differ someone is either right or wrong. And when people think like that, they want to be right. When they go for the need to be right, they no longer look for the potential value in someone else's view. Assuming both parties want to be right, tension is then created by both of them not feeling listened to or valued. Competitive behaviour also happens when team members feel they have to prove themselves.

THE IMPACT OF CONFLICT AND TENSION IN TEAMS

If conflict and tension are not managed, they erode trust and make people work on their own rather than cooperate. In really bad cases it also makes people work against each other. This is how a team is impacted by conflict and tension:

- People waste time thinking about it and often also talking to others about it, and thus create more tension.
- When people don't have enough information and they make up their own story, rumours are created and suspicion grows, which is detrimental to teamwork.
- When people don't ask for information or fail to voice concerns, the issue festers and continues to drive team members apart.
- If people don't understand each other, they don't interact and the team is therefore less efficient.
- Conflicting goals create confusion, which leads to inactivity, which affects productivity.
- Competitive behaviour where team members have a personal agenda that doesn't match the team's agenda is deeply divisive and has a negative effect on team spirit.

Conflict and tension doesn't have to be a bad thing. It can even be healthy, if carefully managed, as it can trigger healthy debates and make people think differently. Knowledge and insight can expand, innovation can happen and results flourish. So the point is not to avoid conflict at all costs, it is to manage it in such a way that it becomes a powerful vehicle for teamwork. Let's get specific on how to do it.

SOLUTION 1: COMMUNICATE, COMMUNICATE, COMMUNICATE

In order to fill the communication gaps that others will otherwise fill with their own assumptions you need to communicate, communicate, communicate. Don't be afraid to state the obvious, because it may not be obvious to others. Don't make the assumption that people already know. People always want the context, the reason why something is happening, so put particular focus here.

In order to really understand another person, you need to proactively find some way of stepping into their shoes

SOLUTION 2: GET TOGETHER AND ASK CONSTRUCTIVE QUESTIONS

Instead of assuming, ask questions. Frame questions constructively to get the information you need and to fill the communication gap.

And if you notice that a colleague is avoiding you or seems concerned, invest the time to get together and talk to him/her. And if you are noticing that there are tensions in the team as a whole, get together and talk. Ask open questions that make people open up.

Here are some questions that work for both teams and individuals:

- How are you doing?
- What's going on for you right now?
- Is there anything we need to talk about?
- Is there anything I need to know about?
- Is there anything you need from me right now?
- What's working well for us right now?
- What could be better? What's not working so well?
- How can I help you?
- How can we help each other?

SOLUTION 3: ASSUME POSITIVE INTENT

Everyone is different. Just because they don't think or feel like you, that doesn't mean that they are wrong. People typically do the best they can. Rarely do people intentionally set out to annoy others or create conflict. If somebody says or does something that makes you feel tension, take a step back and look as objectively as possible on the situation. Assume that they have positive intent.

If you only do one thing, let it be this one – assume positive intent. The positive intent may not be clear to you as you don't always have the full context or particular experience of the other person. However, just because it's not easy to grasp what the positive intention is, it's still fair to assume there is one.

SOLUTION 4: STEP INTO SOMEONE ELSE'S SHOES

In order to really understand another person, you need to proactively find some way of stepping into their shoes. If your team members have a hard time seeing eye to eye, you can get them to try out each other's roles to gain greater understanding. You can also encourage or force team members to buddy up, especially those that don't work so well together. ■

Leading Teams – 10 Challenges: 10 Solutions, by Mandy Flint and Elisabet Vinberg Hearn, is published by FT Books and out now. See www.leadingteamsbook.com for more information.