

Get Your Team to Stop Fighting and Start Working

by Amy Gallo

The conflicts that often arise in teams can make you want to throw up your arms in despair, retreat to your office, and live out your career in team-less bliss. But collaboration is here to stay, and while it isn't easy, putting more minds on the job usually yields better results. If your team has dissolved into arguments or two members just can't seem to get along, how can you get things back on track? How do you turn a team marred by dysfunction into one that excels together?

What the Experts Say

Conflict is part of working on a team and, while it's often uncomfortable, it can also be healthy. "There will, even should be, conflict in a group with a task that has even a minimum of complexity," says Jeanne Brett, the DeWitt W. Buchanan, Jr.

Distinguished Professor of Dispute Resolution and Organizations at Kellogg Graduate School of Management, the Director of the Kellogg School's Dispute Resolution Research Center, and co-author of *Getting Disputes Resolved*. Understanding why teams fight, how and when to get involved, and how to prevent fights in the future is a critical skill for all team leaders.

Stop Disputes Before They Happen

Unfortunately, most team leaders assume they'll deal with disagreements as they come up. But Brett advises doing more prep work than that — to have "solid conflict management procedures in place to deal with [conflicts] when they arise, because they will arise." These rules will also help you work through issues more quickly. "Solving disputes after they happen is a hell of a lot more work," adds Richard Boyatzis, Professor of Organizational Behavior at the Weatherhead School of Management at Case Western Reserve University and co-author of *Primal Leadership: Learning to Lead with Emotional Intelligence*.

Another important proactive measure is ensuring that your team shares the same purpose, values, and identity. Boyatzis says teams should "devote a certain amount of time to talking about the team itself." In these discussions, instead of focusing on easier, more concrete issues like goals and measurement, get the group to agree on its purpose first. Do this when the team forms, and throughout its existence. Boyatzis is part of a consortium that has met twice a year for the past decade. The group starts every meeting by reading aloud the team norms they agreed to ten years ago. He concedes that this might seem odd to an outsider but thinks this is what keeps the team grounded and focused.

How and When to Intervene

Some of the most common disputes include conflicts over tasks, working norms,

or process. Regardless of why your team is fighting, following a few simple guidelines can help you resolve disputes quickly.

Intervene early. When two or more team members are engaged in a conflict, the sooner you step in the better. Once the dispute starts, emotions can run high, making it harder to diffuse the situation. Letting conflicts fester can result in hurt feelings and lasting resentment. Boyatzis points out that a simple disagreement can turn into a serious conflict in milliseconds, so it's critical for team managers to be aware of the team dynamics and sense when a disagreement is percolating.

Focus on team norms. The best approach to resolving disputes once they've erupted is to refer back to something the team can, or has already, agreed on. These may be explicit or implicit team norms. If you haven't previously discussed norms as a team, now is a good time to hold the conversation. Be careful not to frame the discussion around the dispute but to focus it on setting rules of engagement for going forward.

Identify a shared agreement. Your job as the team leader is to help the fighting team members reach an accord. "The key is to respect each party and the reason behind their point of view," says Brett. The only way to do this, according to Boyatzis, is to talk it through. He says that most team leaders "cut short dialogue or don't do it in an inclusive way." Once the cards are on the table, you need to "facilitate an outcome that takes into account both parties point of views," explains Brett. Compromise often has a bad connotation in the business world, but the resolution doesn't need to be a lowest common denominator answer. Rather, it should integrate both parties' interests. Whenever possible, connect the resolution back to shared purposes, values, or identity that can help both parties see eye to eye.

Moving On After a Disagreement

Boyatzis says the best way to heal war wounds is to start working again. Get a relatively easy task in front of the group to help them rebuild their confidence as a team. As the leader, you can model moving on and focusing on work. If people have been ostracized because of the dispute, make efforts to bring them back into the fold by assigning them an important task or soliciting their opinions. If feelings have been hurt, you may want to let the parties have a break and not directly work together for a short time. Going forward, it will be useful to establish a practice of regularly checking on how you all are working together. This will help you identify problems before they turn into full-fledged disputes.

Principles to Remember

Do:

Set up conflict management procedures before a conflict arises
Intervene early when a fight erupts between team members
Get the team working together again as soon as possible

Don't:

Assume your team agrees on its shared purpose, values, or vision
Let conflicts fester or go unattended
Move on without first talking about the conflict as a team

Case Study #1: Resolving personal conflicts on a self-managed team

Gary Hartman* was attending a partner meeting of his small boutique consulting firm in Boston when a conflict erupted. The firm's eight partners gather each December to make decisions about their compensation — a sensitive discussion for which the team had already set ground rules. Each partner presented his or her accomplishments and progress against goals for the year, then the other partners had time to ask questions, typically polite requests for clarification. If there was a more serious issue, the partners usually brought it up before the meeting so it could be addressed outside of this formal setting. During Susan's presentation, another partner, Robert, kept interrupting and questioning the truth of what she was saying. He said he'd heard from an analyst that one project Susan cited as a success was one in spite of her. The analyst said that Susan had regularly offended the client, showed up late to meetings, and did little to no work. At first, the other partners allowed Robert to have the floor, but soon Gary and some others realized that Susan was being publicly humiliated. "It was worthwhile to get other people's perspective in there but not in this way," Gary said, especially since Robert's evidence was hearsay and the team hadn't previously agreed on how outside information should be brought in.

As a self-managed team, they had to decide how to deal with the fact that one partner had openly disparaged another. They decided to make explicit a norm that had been implicit: anything potentially damaging or hurtful between two partners should be dealt with one-on-one first. If a resolution can't be reached, then it can be brought to the broader team, but not sooner. They urged Susan and Robert to discuss the client issue themselves and resolve it. The partners also set up a subgroup to address how outside perspectives would be brought into the compensation discussion in the future. This group was responsible for dealing with confrontations, looking at all sides, and developing a balanced recommendation to the partnership.

*Details have been changed

Case Study #2: Focusing team members on a shared goal

Kelley Johnson, the owner of an eco-lodge in Belize, regularly has to deal with team dynamics. Since the lodge is in a remote location, it employs over 25 full-time staff who live onsite for weeks at a time. This close-knit work situation can often lead to conflict, if not managed correctly. The lodge has four managers including Katja, a German expat who runs the front office and oversees the staff when Kelley is off site, and Carlos, a Belizean who is in charge of client services. Katja is incredibly

organized and meticulous about her work. Carlos is a genius when it comes to client service, making each guest feel special. "He has an ability to make every guest feel as if they are the first one to ever see a snake," says Kelley.

But last winter, Katja asked Kelley to fire Carlos because she felt he wasn't doing his job. He regularly forgot to do tasks and was sloppy with his paperwork. She was frustrated and felt as if she was working twice as hard as him. Carlos had also previously complained about Katja. He resented her criticism and felt she was too cold to the clients. As Kelley saw it, they were both failing to understand or appreciate each other's talents. Kelley responded to Katja by asking her to take a step back and look at the situation. Carlos was failing to do part of his job description but he was invaluable to the lodge. She conceded that his job description should be changed so that he could live up to expectations.

She spoke to both employees, explained why each one was extremely valuable to the team, and asked them to appreciate what the other brought. They were part of a profit-sharing plan which meant a piece of their salary hinged on the business. She asked them to focus on the larger purpose and to put their disputes behind them. With expectations reset, Carlos and Katja found a way to work together by accepting they had completely different styles but both cared ultimately about the same thing — making the lodge successful.