Conflict: friend or foe? It can be either of the preceding, but most people usually categorize it as the latter. Conflict in itself is not the problem. It is, rather, our reactions to it that determine the impact, and thus cause us to characterize it as a negative experience. Conflict or divergence can be destructive or it can be constructive. It is up to the people involved in the conflict to manage the outcome. Conflict is inevitable and at times stimulates beneficial or creative thinking. Often times conflict is a signal that people are making different assumptions about what has thus far gone unspoken. When that happens, conflict gives them an opportunity to articulate their assumptions and then to figure out a way to come to agreement. In a Learning Team situation, conflict can arise when the original agreement to work together does not address enough specifics about exactly how and when team members will accomplish individual tasks. This will inhibit achieving overall team goals.

Understanding that conflict can, will, and perhaps should occur puts a greater emphasis on the Learning Team Charter. It is much more than a formality or a document to be completed quickly, signed, and filed away. It serves as a roadmap the team can use to arrive at its destination. When the Learning Team Charter section on conflict management is completed in a conscientious manner, it will provide the team with an agreement about how conflicts will be resolved for the good of the team and possibly reduce the negativity associated with conflict.
The Learning Team Charter requires the team to focus on the potential conflicts that may arise between or among team members in each course. Team dynamics and conflict can differ from course to course. Creating a new Charter for each course is essential. What conflicts can the team anticipate? How will the team deal with these and other conflicts that may arise? The “right” answers to these questions may be as varied as the individual personalities serving on the team.

As an effective Learning Team, however, individual team members need to agree on the decisions and come up with a collective resolution that all team members will support. An important benefit of taking time to carefully complete the Learning Team Charter is that when conflicts arise—and they will more often than you might imagine—the team will know how to manage them and how to resolve them in an effective and efficient manner. It is, after all, easier to agree on guidelines and processes everyone believes are fair when things are going well, rather than when the team members are in the midst of conflict.

When working in a Learning Team, the objective is to resolve conflicts in a win-win manner, rather than a win-lose. If one or more team members take a win-lose approach to resolving conflict, the team as a whole will suffer, and the real result will be lose-lose.

**Analyzing and Understanding the Conflict**

Managing conflict and resolving conflicts are two distinct processes. Before conflict can be managed, it must be understood. One approach to conflict analysis and resolution is known as the 4Rs Method, according to Engleberg et al (2003). This method has four steps, each of which is summarized with a word beginning with the letter "R":

- **Reasons.** In this step, the causes or reasons for the conflict are explored and openly, yet respectfully, discussed.
- **Reactions.** In this step, team members look at their own reactions to the conflict. If those reactions are destructive, rather than
constructive, individuals can self-correct and take the necessary steps to recommit to team success.

- **Results.** If the conflict is not resolved, what might happen? How might the team work together to resolve the conflict in a constructive manner?

- **Resolution.** Which approach to conflict resolution could be used to effectively resolve the conflict? (p. 154).

**Conflict Resolution Approaches**

Once the team understands the conflict, it can then choose an appropriate approach to resolve it. Ralph H. Kilmann and Kenneth W. Thomas, authors of the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument, have identified five general approaches to dealing with conflict: 1) avoidance, 2) accommodation, 3) competition, 4) compromise, and 5) collaboration. Conflict resolution is situational and no one approach provides the best or one right approach for all circumstances (Thomas, 2002). There are, however, general guidelines which can be used to decide which of these approaches will be most effective in certain situations.

**Avoidance**

Although avoiding or denying the existence of a conflict usually does not cause the dispute to go away, there are times when avoidance is appropriate in the team situation. If the conflict itself is not central to the work of the team, it may be best to set it aside so that the important work of the team can proceed. When the situation gets out of control and emotions are running high, avoidance is sometimes the best approach as well. In these situations, it is best to reschedule the team meeting so that people can collect their thoughts, approach the situation more calmly, and have time to put the conflict in perspective.
Accommodation

When the accommodation approach is used, one person gives in to another for the sake of getting along. This may be an appropriate approach when the person accommodating does not view the matter as important, or when it is more important that the group experience cohesiveness or harmony than for an individual perspective on the topic to prevail. Before becoming an accommodator, however, the individual team member must be certain he or she can live with the decision and will not later regret having made it.

Competition

In a nutshell, competition may best be described as a win-lose style of conflict resolution. That is, one team member may feel so importantly about the topic that he or she needs to aggressively pursue his or her perspective in hopes of persuading other team members to view the situation in the same manner. This approach is appropriate when a team member believes alternatives being explored are not practical, ethical, or legal.

Compromise

Generally, when people compromise it is to accept a middle ground position, i.e., one in which each person gives up something for the sake of agreement. By definition, a compromise only partially satisfies each person. This approach is often effective when teams have reached an impasse and are running out of time to attempt to resolve the conflict. Sometimes, a compromise is the best solution that can be reached under the circumstances.

Collaboration

In an ideal world rather than compromising, people in dispute would be able to collaborate to find a resolution that satisfies the needs of everyone involved. Collaboration requires creative and cooperative efforts.
The primary roadblock to collaboration usually is the amount of time and energy it requires. Collaboration is generally effective when the team has sufficient time to fully explore the needs, perspectives, and preferences of all team members, and when 100% commitment from each person is needed to accomplish team goals.

**Conflict Resolution Processes**

Before attempting to resolve conflicts, it helps if each person takes some time to think rationally about the conflict and prepare for the discussions. In the book, *Resolving Conflicts on the Job*, authored by Wisinski (1993) the author developed the A-E-I-O-U Model for individual use before engaging in discussions to resolve conflict. Each letter of the model stands for a step, as follows:

- **A**: Assume the other people involved in the conflict mean well
- **E**: Express your own feelings
- **I**: Identify what you would like to see happen
- **O**: Outcome—express the outcome you would like to see while remaining open to another outcome that may satisfy your needs and concerns
- **U**: Understanding—the agreement should be understood, and committed to, by each member of the team (p. 27).

Once each team member understands the conflict and has an idea about what possible solutions will meet the needs of team as a whole, it is time to decide on a process to use to resolve the conflict. There are three general processes to consider: 1) negotiation, 2) mediation, and 3) arbitration.

Negotiation does not require the assistance of anyone outside of the team. Rather, the team members meet together to talk about their individual views on the topic that is at the center of the conflict; identify
what is important to them; propose a solution that meets their needs; listen to what others in the team have to say; and then attempt to reach an agreement. Effective negotiations are conducted in a win-win style and frame of mind. Most Learning Team conflicts are resolved through this informal process.

Mediation is a facilitated process of negotiation. If Learning Team members are not able to negotiate their own resolution, they could ask the faculty member to assist them with the discussions. Sometimes, the faculty member can be used as a behind-the-scenes resource. That is, the faculty member might be able to help individual team members see the strengths or benefits of the proposals other members are making. The faculty member can share insights about an effective approach to the discussions or about other possible solutions the team has not yet considered. If, however, these behind-the-scenes efforts are not effective, the Learning Team could ask the faculty member to meet with them in order to discuss the conflict and help them reach a solution. In mediation the faculty member does not have decision-making power. Rather, he or she is a neutral person who focuses on the process of the discussions and helps the team focus on the issues, rather than personalities and on the future rather than the past. Only when Learning Teams are unable to resolve their own disputes should the faculty member be asked to assist.

Arbitration is a process for resolving conflict, but is one which is virtually never used as a way to resolve Learning Team conflicts. It is a last resort and way to achieve a decision when the team is at an impasse and is not able or willing to come to agreement on its own. The arbitrator is asked to make a decision for the team. Arbitration is a win-lose approach to conflict resolution. There will be winners and there will be losers, since the arbitrator is asked to decide whose approach or idea is right or best for the team as a whole. Clearly, all members of the Learning Team will need to agree to abide by the arbitrator's decision. Although this is a possible approach to conflict resolution, arbitration is not a practical
approach to Learning Team conflicts. It can lead to derision and erode the team morale and cohesiveness.

**Summary**

Conflict cannot be avoided but managed correctly, it does not have to be negative. Learning Team conflicts are situational and some will be easier to resolve than others. With a commitment to communicating openly and respectfully, the vast majority of Learning Team conflicts will be readily and easily resolved. When it appears a conflict is escalating or the team has reached an impasse, it would be wise to collectively consider which of the following approaches to conflict resolution might be best: avoidance, accommodation, competition, compromise, or collaboration.

If the Learning Team is unable to resolve a conflict through informal discussions, the team members should consider team negotiation or faculty member mediation. Only as a last resort should Learning Team members ask the faculty member to intervene and serve as an arbitrator of the dispute.

The Learning Team Charter is an important document. The investment a Learning Team makes at the beginning of each course to consider and plan for ways to manage and resolve conflicts will be well worth it when conflict happens. With upfront agreement about how team conflicts will be resolved, few conflicts should reach a point of annihilation.
References


