Team Building
Dealing With Conflict in a Team

Handling conflict in a team successfully has several characteristics:

- **Conflict is considered natural.** Team members assume that conflict, disagreement, and promotion of disparate ideas are bound to occur in vibrant, successful groups. Where there is creativity, there exists the chance of conflict.
- **Conflict is resolved through openness.** Since conflict is natural to the group, it is dealt with in natural ways – through open discussion. In many groups that are not teams, conflicts are suppressed. They fester; they influence people's relationships and interactions with one another; they surface in ways that don't always seem related to the original troubling issues. In a team, members know that conflicts can often sharpen the differences, present additional options, and provide checks and balances.
- **Conflict occurs over issues, not over personalities.** People may be parties to conflict, but they are not the issue. As a team member, you may disagree with another member, but he or she is not the target of innuendo, put-downs, or embarrassment. What counts are the issues and the perceptions of those issues, not the personalities involved.
- **Conflict involves a search for alternatives.** Team members don't conduct whodunit-type investigations to try to pin the blame on someone for a problem or a failure. The driving motivation in team problem solving is "We don't like the situation as it is now; what would we prefer as an alternative?"
- **Conflict resolution is present-oriented.** A discussion of the conflict concentrates on what is happening in the group now. Prior disagreements, conversations that have taken place with others outside the group, and previous behaviors of team members in other situations are not part of the working through of the conflict. What matters is the here and now – what is being said now, in this setting.

- **Conflict is a group issue.** Disagreements that affect certain team members become issues for the entire group to deal with, because they can affect the working of the entire team. Team members, therefore, don't have to resolve differences on their own. The whole team pitches in to help.

Dealing With Opposition To Your Ideas

One of the most common impediments to communicating freely in a group is the defensiveness of people whose ideas and suggestions are being evaluated and perhaps disagreed with, in whole or in part. You've seen defensive, self-protective behavior many times. You've probably experienced it in yourself on occasion. The pulse quickens, heat and color flood the face, palms sweat, and the voice rises in pitch and perhaps in volume. These are very natural reactions when one feels attacked or discounted in any way.

The chief problem with defensiveness is that it usually hampers one's ability to listen and to think through what others are saying. Ideally, when an idea is discussed, its originator believes that what will eventually emerge is an idea that is tested and even strengthened. That's often true unless the group has to spend much of its time debating with the originator, who worries that his or her idea is being mangled, misunderstood, and mutilated.

You can train yourself to deal constructively with resistance and disagreement. Of course, it's much easier to do so when you are a member of a supportive and sympathetic group. But if you believe that your idea can stand the rigors of close and thoughtful examination, follow these five suggestions to help you deal with opposition:

1. **Relax**. Easily said, not so easily done. Sit back in your chair. Keep your facial expression attentive. Don't frown. Don't shake your head. When you look relaxed, even though inside you may not be, you look confident. You also invite people to discuss your idea openly. And that's valuable to you, because you learn what the others are thinking. If you wish to rebut their criticism or analysis, you're getting the ammunition to do so. On the other

hand, when you're relaxed, your filters are open, and you may actually pickup some valuable tips on how to improve your idea.

2. **Listen**. Maintain eye contact. Again, keep your facial expression attentive, showing that you value what is being said. Remain seated back in your chair. If you lean forward, you may look as if you are about to pounce on the person evaluating your idea. Don't interrupt while others are talking unless it is quite clear to you that they have misconstrued your idea and are wasting valuable discussion time talking about something you did not mean.

   Listen not only to what is said but to who is saying it. If you have to do a bit of selling later, it may help to know who resists your idea and why.

3. **Accept**. You don't' have to agree with whatever criticism is leveled at your idea, but you'd better accept that the people leveling it take their criticism seriously. You want to be careful not to make statements that appear to be put-downs or ridicule. Avoid, for example, such statements as "how in the world did you come to that conclusion?" or "come on; you're really reaching." Sometimes you might even blurt out, "That's ridiculous." Then the fight might be on.

   Even if you don't say things that distress others, you may show disapproval in your face. Some people can listen quietly to others, yet have an expression on their face that is easily interpreted as "What nonsense." That kind of nonverbal communication hardly makes friends and influences people – in your favor, at any rate.

4. **Make it a group issue**. If you hang back from defending your idea, you may be pleasantly surprised to hear someone else take up the defense instead. That person probably has more credibility and influence than you in this situation because he or she is nonpartisan. But if no one else responds immediately, just sit quietly. You don't always have to speak up just because other members want to address you on the idea, unless they ask you questions that only you can answer.

   If one or two people address their comments to you, and the discussion seems too narrowly focused, you can make the discussion a group issue by saying, "I've heard extensively how Jane and Howard feel about my idea, but I'd find it valuable to hear how others look at it." That's often all it takes for others to

join in, and you may wind up with a lively and broad discussion. You can then relax again.

5. **Answer.** If the group discussion still leaves something missing or to be desired, you may want to respond to some of the disagreement. When you do, address the group, not your critic. Remember, you've made it a group issue now. Don't take it back.

Managing Conflict as the Team Leader

There will be times when a conflict between two members of the team prevents each member from being fully effective – and keeps the team from moving forward. Try to resolve the conflict quickly by asking each party to the dispute to respond to the following statements in private. Ask them to use only positive statements – noting "finger pointing" such as "He should stop doing …." Then bring the two together and help them look for ways to boil their responses down to objectives that both of them can agree with. Finally, show what has to be done to satisfy those objectives, who does what, and when.

- I believe that he (she should):
- He (she) believes that I should:
- I believe that I should:
- He (she) believes that he (she) should:

Managing Conflict

When conflict arises, keep the following in mind;

- **Points of View**. The person on the other side of the conflict has a point of view that is just as legitimate and reasonable to him or her as yours is to you.
- **Uncomfortable**. The other person may also be uncomfortable about the conflict or disagreement, just as you are.
- **Acceptable Solutions**. The other person is usually willing to accept a solution if you can make it sufficiently attractive. At least he or she can be persuaded to work with you to formulate a resolution of the conflict.
- **Keep to Issues**. It is safer and wiser to keep to the issues in any discussion and to avoid arguments that are personal.

- **Think Future**. The future is often a more constructive base for discussion than the past. Rather than dwell on what or who caused the conflict, emphasize what can be done to provide a solution or an alternative to the situation that exists now.