TEACHING CONFLICT RESOLUTION SKILLS
IN THE BUSINESS CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

The use of teams is increasing in both business and classroom settings. Successful team participation requires good communication skills, familiarity with problem solving techniques, and the ability to resolve conflicts. While businesses train their employees in these skills, there does not appear to be a systematic effort to develop these skills in students. Conflict resolution skills will provide students some tools to use in resolving problems in team experiences, and provide a basis for further learning. This paper presents a Conflict Resolution teaching module, based on a mediation model.

INTRODUCTION

Many companies use teams to identify, research, and resolve problems. American Express, General Electric, AT&T, Boeing, Citibank, Disney, the U.S. Post Office and Xerox are among the many companies which use teams. Quality and reengineering movements have led companies to realize that there was a need to change old work patterns. Teams are an important part of this movement (Pacakowsky 1995). Wellsins and George (1991) reported on a nationwide survey by Development Dimensions International (DDI); the Association for Quality and Participation (AQP) and Industry Week in which 26% of the respondents replied that they used self-directed teams (SDTs) in at least some of their activities, and expected more than half of their workforce to be working in teams by 1996. Of the Fortune 500 companies with sales of at least $500 million, 32% used SDTs. In order to prepare students to be successful and efficient in this new workplace, the use of team projects in the business curriculum has increased (Greising 1989, Robbins 1994).

Efficient teams provide benefits to the company and to the individual. Robbins (1994) investigated the idea that individual responsibilities and assignments benefited by participation in teams, and found that group work had a positive impact on the team member’s appraisal of the task assigned to them. Respondents reported a heightened sense of meaningfulness in their work, a sense of belonging to the team, and higher levels of commitment to a group project than to individual assignments. Studies of companies with successful teams report improved productivity, increased measures of quality, higher levels of job satisfaction and customer service, and higher morale (Mussewhite and Moran 1990, Versteeg 1990, Wellsins and George 1991).

Several authors have identified skills which must be developed for both the individual and the team to be effective. Skills in communication and interpersonal relations are frequently mentioned attributes for success. The major ability, however, that is vital to the effective functioning of a team is the ability to resolve conflicts (King 1996, Mussewhite and Moran 1990, Steckler and Fondas 1995, Versteeg 1990, Wellsins and George 1991).

These important skills can be learned through training and coaching. Wellsins and George (1991) reported that 83% of the companies they studied offered training in problem solving, 62% taught communication skills, and 61% provided specific training in conflict resolution. Insufficient training was given as the number one cause of the failure of a team.

In order to prepare students to be able to work efficiently and effectively in this new workplace, the use of team projects in business classes has increased (Robbins 1994). New curricula at several top business schools emphasize leadership/teamwork training (Deutschman 1991, Kruger 1994).

Many business courses involve team projects. Often, the focus is on successful completion of the project, with little, if any, specific training as to the efficient functioning of the team. A recent literature search revealed 360 references to alternative dispute resolution, and 94 references to conflict resolution. Only nine of these references referred to teaching conflict resolution skills. Of these, four focused on teaching the skills to elementary and secondary students and teachers as a technique to lessen classroom violence, one focused on Eastern Europe, one was limited to nurses, and two were directed toward business managers. The one article which
recommended teaching conflict resolution skills to business students was from a lawyer whose primary concern was the need for future business managers to understand these skills as a method of solving legal disputes (Neslund 1988). There does not appear to be a systematic attempt to teach conflict resolution skills to business students.

Apparently both business leaders and educators understand the importance of team projects. While businesses provide conflict resolution training to their employees, this training does not appear to be given to business students. Training in conflict resolution would help the students develop the skills which would help them deal with the inevitable problems which arise out of team projects. The opportunity to develop confidence and knowledge in this important area will also enhance the students’ performance in the workplace. This paper presents a Conflict Resolution Teaching Module. The module is based on a mediation model. There are four, 90-minute sessions which can be adapted to work within any business class which includes team projects.

SESSION 1: THE NATURE OF CONFLICT

Conflict is an inevitable part of team assignments, and it can hamper or even prevent productivity. While different views may cause discomfort, it also gives everyone an opportunity to view a situation from a different angle. Thus, especially in team work, conflict may bring the opportunity for creativity.

Exercise 1.1 Each student writes down three words they associate with "conflict." These are written on the board and discussed. Words frequently seen are "powerless," "angry" and "scary."

Exercise 1.2 Each student is to write down three positive outcomes of conflict. These words are also written on the board, and discussed.

The Origin of Conflict

Conflict usually involves one of four problem areas. When attempting to resolve a conflict, it is important to identify the origin of the problem. The basis of conflict can be found by examining:

1. People: Are the people involved unable to communicate? Is there a cultural or gender barrier involved?
2. Relationship: Do the people have a pre-existing relationship which is getting in the way of working together now? Do they just not like each other?
3. Procedural: is the problem stemming from the manner in which the group works together? How are assignments made? Who is making the decisions?
4. Substantive: Does the problem lie in the content of the decisions which are being made by the group? for the group by the professor?

Exercise 1.3 Students develop a list of common team problems and analyze to which area the problem belongs. Once that area is identified, the solution can be geared toward the problem. The real issue may get lost in all of the bad feelings which have surfaced. Identifying the area of the problem will move the participants to a solution.

Conflict Styles

Each individual has their own personal way of dealing with conflict. Typical Conflict Styles are:

1. Shark: controlling, overpowering, values goals over relationships.
2. Teddy Bear: accommodating, values relationships over goals.
3. Fox: compromise is the only way, everything must be 50/50.
4. Turtle: avoids conflict, will not engage.
5. Owl: collaborator, believes that there can be win/win solutions. Values both relationships and goals.

Exercise 1.4 Each student completes a survey to identify which of the five basic conflict styles fits them.

SESSION 2: NEGOTIATION

Negotiation is a process of discussing or bargaining in an attempt to resolve differences (Webster 1988). When working on team assignments, participants need to be able to negotiate when conflict arises. People tend to approach most conflictive situations with the attitude that they are right, and the other person is wrong, or that if I give in to you, I am giving up something of myself. Fisher, Ury and Patton (1991) suggest three tests of a successful negotiation: did it produce agreement? was it efficient? did it improve the connection between the parties?

Exercise 2.1 The class pairs off into teams. Each team is given a situation to role play, and only told, "Convince the other side to see it your way."
It is very difficult to convince someone of a different point of view when they have an equally strong feeling about their own. This first exercise needs to be stopped after a few minutes, and additional information given.

Exercise 2.2 Each person is to list five things that are important to them about the conflict in 2.1. These may include a good grade, helping a friend, etc. The lists are then shared with their partners to determine if they have any common goals.

People come to most negotiations from their position. This is the end result they hope to get, or think they can achieve. As seen in the first exercise, it is difficult to get a result that both people are happy with when you engage in a positional negotiation. When two people uncover why they are attached to that position, as the teams have done in this last exercise, they start to recognize their interests. Interest-based negotiation has the potential for more positive results than positional based negotiations.

Fisher, et.al (1991) state that interest-based negotiations are based on a four step method: 1. Separate the people from the problem: redirect personal attacks into attacks on the problem. 2. Avoid positions, discover interests: try to find out why a person has that particular position. 3. Discover options for mutual benefit: once you find out what everyone is actually interested in, brainstorm to determine how many of those interests can be met in a joint decision. 4. Use objective standards: if questions of fact come up, seek out the advice of an expert. If

Exercise 2.3 Students now go back to their pairs and attempt to negotiate a result which will meet as many interests as possible for both parties. When the period is nearly up, the groups are polled to review what each group has accomplished.

Interest-based bargaining can help parties find results which they did not know were possible. Even though the people involved may appear to be hopelessly at odds, there may be ways to find solutions that will satisfy at least the major interests of the parties involved.

SESSION 3: MEDIATION SKILLS
Mediation is a problem-solving process where two or more people in a conflict meet with a neutral third party and create a solution to end their conflict. The neutral party is called a mediator and does not make a decision for the parties. The mediator’s role is to facilitate the negotiation of the conflicting parties.

Historically, mediation comes from Chinese and Japanese culture, where an emphasis on peace-making rather than win/lose alternatives, has made it the dominant form of resolution. Grounded in Confucianism, and shared by Buddhism and Taoism, mediation is based in the concept that conflict does not equate to contest (Crum 1987).

Individuals may find themselves playing the role of a mediator, whether by helping individual members of a team who may be having difficulty working together, or using the skills of a mediator in solving personal problems.

Mediation consists of four simple steps:
1. Setting ground rules for behavior during the mediation.
2. Letting each party state the problem, and set an agenda for what must be discussed.
3. Developing options for mutual gain.
4. Choosing an option, and creating an agreement.

The mediator uses their skills to help the parties to succeed at this type of negotiation. Two skills which are particularly helpful in negotiation are reflective listening and reframing. Reflective listening is a two step process. First, the mediator listens carefully to the speaker and tries to paraphrase back what he has heard. This reframing assures the speaker that he has been heard. If the content seems to have a lot of emotional underpinnings, the mediator then attempts to state back to the speaker the emotion that he has heard. The stating of the emotion tends to diffuse it, and allow the speaker to be less attached to it.

Reframing is the essential skill of any mediator. Reframing takes emotionally charged language and restates it in a neutral context. For example, Mary might say, “George is impossible to work with. He is never on time, and always blames me that the work isn’t done.” The mediator might reframe by saying, “It sounds like you and George have had scheduling and work distribution problems.” While Mary wanted to blame George, the mediator attempted to discuss the problem, not the people. Reframing can often redirect the negative energy.

Exercise 3.1 Students form teams of two. The first
speaker should discuss why he believes he will do well in a marketing position. The other person should listen, and attempt to paraphrase the content. Then the speaker should continue, and the listener should state the emotion. The roles of speakers and listener are then switched, with the team following the same instructions. The class then reviews the process.

SESSION 4: MEDIATION CONTINUED

These skills which have been developed now need to be practiced by role-playing a mediation situation. Students are formed into groups of three, one acting as the mediator, and the other two are given roles to play.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The teaching module which has been developed is an attempt to raise awareness of the benefits of conflict resolution skills as a method of increasing the efficient functioning of student teams. As instructors gain knowledge of these skills, they can remind the students of what they have learned, and reinforce the principles involved. Students who have developed skills in conflict resolution will be better able to deal with the inevitable interpersonal problems that arise from a team project, whether it is in an academic or business setting.

REFERENCES


