**Group work/Conflict**

Sources:

The Vital Role of Conflict Resolution in Teams: A Fine-Grained Look at the Links Between Conflict Type, Conflict Management Strategies, and Team Outcomes - Kristin Behfar University of California, Irvine, Randall Peterson, London Business School, et al

Groups, Teams, and Conflict Management - Richard Posthuma, Andrzej Nowak

International Journal of Conflict Management, various issues, background reading

Use in the Oct/Nov 4/5 person team construct. Preparation for Spring projects with teams of 4/5.

**Cover in lecture: Types of group conflict**

**Voting Problems** – is there a procedure that where consensus isn’t built, decisions get made without a process?

**Compromise/Consensus Problems** – can’t reach agreement?

**Discussion/Debate Problems** – solutions are determined without an agreed process, everyone’s input, and voices aren’t allowed to speak?

**Open Communication Problems** – I can’t air problems, people are defensive, we don’t even discuss things?

**Idiosyncratic Solution Problems** – we don’t have a process to solve disagreements?

**Avoidance Problems** – we don’t discuss problems when they’re aired?

**Responsibility Problems** – we don’t have a process to fairly allocate responsibilities?

 Those are the major group conflict topics, and the solutions/approaches may vary for each.  So first, think where the issue really falls, then we can talk approach/solution.

For any issue – the two keys are – **OPEN COMMUNICATION** and **STRUCTURE**

We try to promote structure by starting with group planning – that’s intended to address responsibility problems (usually the biggest problem).  But many other issues only apply when there’s a specific conflict in delivery.  We don’t enforce a straight structure, for example for voting (majority, or by responsible party for task), because each team has different skillsets, but the idea is that in the process of working in groups, you get experience encountering and trying different strategies to address issues (because you’ll have them in the real world, too).

If, for example, there’s a compromise problem – you can’t agree on a solution – one recommendation is to not discuss the problem itself, but the approach to making decisions.  That way, everyone buys into the process.

Talk through strategies, openers:

“I think we may not always agree on an approach.  Can we discuss how we’re making decisions?  I would feel more comfortable if we incorporated discussion into decision-making, and that we reach consensus on the direction of major milestones.  I think we all bring different experiences and skills to the team, and we’re missing an opportunity to get the value from that diversity when we have decisions made autonomously.  I’m sure there are pros and cons to different approaches to making decisions, but can we talk through it and decide how we decide going forward?  That would address my concerns and give us a strong process to smooth out any disconnects in the future.  Would you be amenable to that approach of debate and persuade?  Do you think there are compelling reasons to adopt a different approach – majority vote, or delegating decisions to different team members based on different areas of the project?  I’d like to get some varied experiences in this assignment, and would like to have some decision-making input.  Do you have a different perspective?”

If there’s a communication problem – one recommendation would be to addressing it head on –

Talk through strategies, leading statements:

“I’m feeling disconnected from some of the discussions.  Can we institute a process where we all get to bring agenda items to the meeting, and everyone gets to weigh in?  I think that would help me get feedback on my approach from the team, and I think I may have valuable insights to add.  If we can structure that more formally, I would feel like there’s a venue for my input, even if we ultimately go another direction.  I can’t see any disadvantages to this approach, but I’d be interested in hearing thoughts from others.”

High performing teams use discuss/debate and idiosyncratic solutions to overcome conflicts (although both of those approaches themselves can have problems).  What’s common is that in the research, these highest performing teams explicitly discussed the impact of relationship conflict on the team and agree it should not be allowed to impede performance.  Members agree to rules or procedures that enforced this agreement (e.g., cooling off periods, specific processes to gather input, a mechanism to vote, etc.).

So what does this mean for you?

My suggested process/framework to resolving conflict within the team:

1. We have mandated weekly group meetings with agendas. This is the venue to bring this up and make it a specific agenda topic.  You have a concern/see a problem – it’s incumbent on you to raise that issue (maybe no one else is thinking of it, maybe others see the same thing but are afraid to say something).  This is a responsibility of each team member.  It’s also a leadership trait – addressing issues, risks, and driving to resolution.  First thing: ask, in a one-off team meeting or in the next group session, to make your concern the focus on the conversation for a bit.  I would do this in person, not via email. (Tell them story from Pathfinder Project, tell them story from T-Mo, tell them the Canonsburg story)
2. Categorize the problem when you’re preparing.  Using that categorization, we can brainstorm approaches and language that would be facilitate a satisfactory outcome before you actually have the meeting.  The outcome matters, and that should be explicitly stated.  “All high performing teams agree that problems like this can impact performance.  We all agree our performance is the point of the exercise.  So this is relevant to the assignment, and important to address.”  You’re already building consensus and driving more team unity.  You agree on something right out of the gate.
3. State you concern directly.  Keep it constructive and fact-based.  Start with your perspective, not an accusation directed towards others.  One is *I don’t feel my input is being considered*, the other is *you are ignoring me*.  The former will get more traction.
4. Explicitly request feedback and context (why you’re bringing it up and what you’re hoping to achieve).  This brings the team into the discussion, gives them a venue to respond, and takes them off the defensive.  Start with – “this is how I’m feeling – it was hard to bring this up, because I feel… but I really wanted to discuss this because **I want us all to work well together**, it’s been bothering me, and I thought to the only way to make things better for me was to confront this head on with all of you.  Now that I’ve brought this up, **I really want to hear how you feel**.  Does this resonate?  Is this a surprise?  Does anyone else feel like this?”
   1. **I want us all to work well together and perform well as a team – outcome**
   2. **I really want to hear how you feel – feedback**
5. In whatever you say – propose a solution and solicit feedback.  Make sure to discuss the pros and cons of alternatives. “I’m not asking that we adopt my suggestion to anything specific, but I am requesting first that we discuss how we choose what suggestions to adopt, or how we gather input.  If we can get the process solid, it takes care of individual issues/concerns that vary from specific decision to decision.  I think we should get everyone’s input on significant decisions, and that we decide by consensus what is significant – meaning if any one of us feel something is that important, we should be able to add to this to discuss.  And then we need to agree – do we need to debate until we’re unanimous, or do we need to put major things to a vote.  I would volunteer that this would make me feel better, even if I am outvoted on an issue, because I know I get a chance to make my case.  This may take more time, but will lead to a better outcome for all of us.”
6. Be prepared to get constructive feedback in return, and consider it honestly.  If you say *I don’t feel my input is being considered*, and the team responds – *we’re shocked, we never knew you thought anything different- or, you never said anything, how would we know?* – consider if what they’re telling you is true (don’t get defensive), and either point to specific actions that indicate otherwise, or be ready to concede that you can do something different to share your input going forward (a good outcome!).
7. Keep it professional, not personal.  You don’t have to like everyone.  They don’t have to like you.  But most people will be reasonable to reason, and I don’t think anyone has come into the team to explicitly disenfranchise you.  So if you’re able to air your concerns and agree on a process for discussing and resolving problems, you should be prepared to compromise on an approach.  You may end up with decisions outcomes that you wouldn’t choose if you were working independently.  But that’s part of the process of working in a team.  You can get more done with more people, dividing and conquering – even if you could do it better/would do it different by yourself.  Think about what’s the optimal outcome given you have to find the most amenable solution to everyone – that’s more realistic.  Everyone will have a different perspective.  I really do believe you’ll address most of the issue just by walking through the concern using this framework.

Ultimately, in the real world, you have an escalation process for significant disconnects (the team has agreed to debate/discuss, but the majority wants to do something unethical) within your organizational structure (direct management, HR line, ethics, etc).

Reiterate for this program/class - I’m the escalation point.  If we have a problem like that, I need to meet with you all as a group and mediate.  But think of this – before we hit that step, did we try to work through this as a team?  Would team be shocked if I showed up to your need meeting and told them there was a problem you raised?  You always want to head it off at the pass.