



Project Pointers

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In the last seven newsletters, we have developed and organized a project scope, created tools for managing it, discussed the roles of the project manager and teams, and reviewed effective meeting facilitation. The application of this knowledge should result in flawless project management. If only! This issue of Project Pointers will focus on the inevitable times when bumps occur in the team's work.

Conflict is a natural part of organizational life and it should not be regarded as a problem per se. Sometimes, conflict brings to light key issues that may have been forgotten or avoided. The absence of conflict may be a sign of a team in trouble. So rather than denying it, concentrate on the best methods for dealing with the disputes.

As always, the **project manager is the key** to clean, appropriate communication in any project. As addressed in earlier newsletters, first ask what you might or might not be doing to contribute to the stress. If you tend to be somewhat controlling in facilitating meetings, it will be hard for people to speak up. If you never meet with team members individually and give them a chance to present concerns, they will be unlikely to do so in a larger group. And, if you rarely take the suggestions given in a project team meeting, conflict may be expressed in a passive-aggressive manner. Finally, how you deal with conflicts in other aspects of the workplace will be noted. Model good behavior and expect the best from your team.

A project is an organized, temporary endeavor that creates a unique product or service.

Remember, a **feud between team members** may have started a long time ago. You can't change their feelings, but you can let them know that their "pre-existing condition" will not derail the work. Try to speak with each of them privately. If this does not diminish the stress in project meetings, bring in a neutral party to facilitate between them at a mutually convenient time. If you supervise the people, of course this is easier. If one is not a direct report and refuses to work with a mediator, consider replacing the person on the team.

Consider Before Negotiation:

- My goal in five words or less:
- What I'm willing to give up to reach this goal:
- My negotiation partner's goals in ten words or less:
- What she or he may be willing to give up to reach these goals:

Both negotiation and collaboration are used in project management. The two are closely related but serve different purposes. In **negotiation**, each party gives up something in order to meet another party half way. Negotiation usually results in a compromise. This conflict resolution approach is commonly used when resources are limited because the mid-point agreement can be settled quickly and efficiently. Unfortunately, the process often results in a mediocre product that's minimally acceptable to all parties.

Collaboration takes into account the values and expertise of all team members, with an emphasis on a solution that pleases everyone. In the ideal world, collaboration would always be the preferred conflict resolution tool. But it requires more time and energy and the group may not bring the necessary level of commitment to work toward this type of consensus. Throughout the project life cycle, both negotiation and collaboration will occur and you must know when to use them.

People respond to conflict in different ways. Some people withdraw and curl up inside themselves during heated discussions. Others take the placater role and smooth over all rocky waters, even to the point of cutting off important

discussion. Forceful team members may attempt to take over the meeting, steam rolling everyone in the room until things go their way. Sometimes, the last person standing has "resolved" the conflict in terms of bringing talk to an end. Formal voting may be required when people are unable to either confront an issue or are unable to reach any kind of agreement. Be aware of the group dynamics at all times and effectively keep the group on task.

Perhaps the most important negotiation tool is a clear understanding of **your personal style**. Long-term, solid conflict resolution requires trust, openness and a positive attitude. A genuine belief in the value of partnership must also be present. Both parties must have a concern for the relationship even when they may not like each other. If they regard collaboration or negotiation as a way to solve a joint problem, then discussions can be viewed as a means to an end. This is basically asking the other person to help you solve a problem.

When preparing for a negotiation meeting, always remember that the **real agendas** may not be the ones on the table. Keep asking yourself, "What do I want?" If you cannot state your goal in five words or less, start over — you may be wanting two separate things. Also know in advance what you're willing to give up. And at the same time, try to think about what the other person wants or may be willing to relinquish.

Try to **start with the issues that are easier to settle**. These may actually be related to the logistics of the meeting itself. Deciding when and where to meet may be the first negotiation step. Also think about who should attend the

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meeting. In some cases, the discussions may progress more calmly if only two people meet. Stress the need for agreement from the beginning and try to keep everyone focused on the need for a positive solution. If discussions grow too heated and personal, take a short break and remind everyone of the meeting goals when you reconvene. If the negotiation's result is in your favor, remain gracious and sensitive to others' feelings. Don't gloat!

And when you can take a minute to reflect quietly—no matter where you are in the process of trying to manage the project conflicts — **go back to the basics:**

Do I have all the information or background?

What are they dealing with personally?

Would they benefit from conflict management training?

What does each contribute that is unique?

Who else could offer essentially the same skills, without the drama?

These are tough issues. The next newsletter will address other project troubleshooting issues. Meanwhile, enjoy the beginning of summer!

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