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Strategies for Conflict Resolution

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Introduction

During the length of a larger project, it is almost inevitable that at one point some kind of conflict will eventually arise.

The potential for conflict is particularly present in projects where a project team consisting of individuals with different backgrounds and attitudes to solve a task with a lot of complex factors to find the right solution for.

However, whether or not one or several conflicts of different gravity will emerge, largely depends on the handling of the project manager.

If a project coordinator (as well as national coordinator) possesses the right tools to handle conflicts, they actually have the potential to positively contribute to the end results of the project, the members of the project team and to the organization as a whole.

Project management is a methodical approach to achieving agreed outcomes within a defined timeframe with defined resources. The primary tasks of a project manager is to organize, plan, monitor, control and adjust project activities while ensuring a healthy comfortable working environment that supports the time frame as well as the direction of the project.

Often, a conflict presents opportunities for improvement. Therefore, it is important to understand (and apply) various conflict resolution techniques.

Why do conflicts occur?

Conflict is a situation where the parties involved are aware of the difference between the current and potential future positions and where these parties' positions are

incompatible with each other. Positions are defined as being based on values, behaviors, needs, expectations, perceptions, resources and personalities. Conflicts may also arise because of dependencies between project participants in the context of solving a task.

Conflicts can have a massive effect to a project's use of resources. Different studies have shown that when a conflict arises, approximately 42% of the projects total resources are allocated to handling this issue alone. Conflict within a project team therefore requires that as a project manager has the ability to solve problems, provide milestones to ensure the conclusion of compromises solve personal differences and ultimately resolve conflicts.

It is important to always consider the possibility of regulation interfering think regulation in all our projects as this often tends to be conflicting or create a greater risk of disagreements and conflicts.

One must be careful to perceive all conflicts as being solely negative. If handled appropriately, conflicts can contribute to a positive development of individuals and organizations, because conflicts can act as an opportunity to address underlying problems. This will ultimately force the project participants to confront the issues and the related results or conclusion and thus be forced to develop new and better solutions.

Proactive measures to prevent conflict

A parameter of measuring the success of a project is keeping the conflict level to a minimum. Creating a “valve” where all project members have the opportunity to express their expectations and issues related to the project in an open forum. This is a way for the project manager to openly demonstrate a will to understand each of the project members’ situation and interests which will have the outcome that the most challenging issues some of the project members might have to specific areas of the project will openly be discussed. This aids the project manager to initiate strategies to solve future conflicts.

Distribution of responsibility and documentation

A detailed and careful distribution of responsibilities and tasks already in the development stage of a project must be documented. It’s the project manager’s responsibility to ensure that all of the project's total requirements are addressed and assigned in accordance with the project group's total capacity.

Securing consensus, scope and clarity of each contract is decisive. Because the project has a lot of contributors, it is essential that each of them has an insight of their role and how they contribute to the total project.

Direction of conflict

When a conflict occurs it always has a direction. The direction of a conflict is defined by the hierarchical structure of the project group. The majority of project groups consist of members where there is a possibility of experiencing conflicts with either superiors, peers or subordinates. The direction of the conflict also determines which role the different members involved in the conflict will adapt into.

One can discourage and prevent conflicts by reading the behavior of its project members. There are three archetypes that are frequently applicable:

Intimidator refers to a person who uses aggressive behavior against other project members. An attack can be direct or indirect and be physical, verbal, or both. The persecutor's actions will make the intimidator feel righteous and superior.

Victim refers to a person who uses nonassertive behavior so others view them as of lesser value to the project. This behavior encourages others to either rescue or intimidate them. Victims will feel helpless, inadequate, sad, scared, or guilty. The victim role is often used because the individual is feeling stressed or has low self-esteem.

Savior refers to a person who uses either nonassertive or aggressive behavior. Individuals become saviors because they will not say "no" and unwillingly assume the responsibility of solving the victim's problem. Some will however also assume the savior role to demonstrate their superiority over the victim.

Both the aggressive as well as the nonassertive behaviors that are present in these roles will lead to win-lose outcomes and therefore doesn't provide an opportunity for a win-win resolution.

It is important for a project manager to understand the dynamics of a conflict before being able to solve it. The internal characteristics of conflict include perception of the goal, perception of the other, view of the other's actions, definition of problem, communication, and internal group dynamics. These characteristics can strongly influence the behavior style of group members and affect the potential outcome of the conflict. In some instances, the project manager's lack of skills to effectively manage and resolve conflict can be the problem.

Strategies to Conflict Resolution

There are five different strategies for conflict resolution - these are Confronting, Compromising, Smoothing, Forcing, and Avoiding. All these strategies will be used in Erasmus+ STINT project in the realization of project activities.

Confronting is a problem solving approach where the focus is on incorporating and collaborating and involves open and direct communication. It entails that the conflicting parties meet face-to-face and collaborate to "sign" an agreement that fulfill both parties' needs.

Compromising is a "give and take" approach. The parties negotiate to reach a mutually acceptable solution. Both parties give up something in order to reach a decision.

Smoothing is an approach based on acceptance or pleasing. A party may sacrifice its own concerns or goals in order to satisfy the concerns or goals of the other party.

Forcing is based on labels such as competing, controlling, or dominating. Forcing occurs when one party goes all out to win its position while ignoring the needs and concerns of the other party. As the intensity of a conflict increases, the tendency for a forced conflict is more likely. This result in a win-lose situation where one party wins at the expense of the other party.

Avoiding is a withdrawal approach. It is viewed as postponing an issue for later or withdrawing from the situation altogether. It is regarded as a temporary solution because the problem and conflict continue to reoccur over and over again.

The five different strategies are listed in the overview below along with a range of different parameters a project manager should asses before choosing a strategy for solving a specific conflict.

Table 1. Parameters for choosing conflict resolution strategy

Confronting	Compromising	Smoothing	Forcing	Avoiding
Stakes are low	Stakes are moderate	Stakes are low	Stakes are high	Stakes are low
Time is adequate	Time is not sufficient	You want to gain time		Stakes are high, but you are unprepared
You want to create a common platform	You are in a deadlock	Goal to be reached is overarching	A "do or die" situation is present	You want to gain time
	Both parties need to win	You want to be harmonious and create good will	Relationship among parties is not important	You cannot win
You want to decrease cost	You want to maintain the relationship among the involved parties	Liability is limited	Important principles are at stake	You want to maintain neutrality or reputation
Both parties need to win		You want to create obligation for a trade-off at a later time		
Skills are complementary				
Trust among parties	You will get nothing if you do not compromise	You would lose anyway	A quick decision must be made	You think problem will go away
Learning is the ultimate goal		Any solution is adequate		You win by delaying

Confronting/ Win-Win/ Collaborating

Also known as *problem confronting* or *problem solving*. Collaboration involves an attempt to work with the other person to find a win-win solution to the problem in hand - the one that most satisfies the concerns of both parties. The win-win approach sees conflict resolution as an opportunity to come to a mutually beneficial result. It includes identifying the underlying concerns of the opponents and finding an alternative which meets each party's concerns.

Examples of when *collaborating* may be appropriate:

- When consensus and commitment of other parties is important
- In a collaborative environment
- When it is required to address the interests of multiple stakeholders
- When a high level of trust is present
- When a long-term relationship is important
- When you need to work through hard feelings, animosity, etc
- When you don't want to have full responsibility

Possible advantages of *collaborating*:

- Leads to solving the actual problem
- Leads to a win-win outcome
- Reinforces mutual trust and respect
- Builds a foundation for effective collaboration in the future
- Shared responsibility of the outcome
- You earn the reputation of a good negotiator
- For parties involved, the outcome of the conflict resolution is less stressful (however, the process of finding and establishing a win-win solution may be very involved – see the caveats below)

Some caveats of *collaborating*:

- Requires a commitment from all parties to look for a mutually acceptable solution
- May require more effort and more time than some other methods. A win-win solution may not be evident
- For the same reason, collaborating may not be practical when timing is crucial and a quick solution or fast response is required
- Once one or more parties lose their trust in an opponent, the relationship falls back to other methods of conflict resolution. Therefore, all involved parties must continue collaborative efforts to maintain a collaborative relationship

Compromising

Compromising looks for an expedient and mutually acceptable solution which partially satisfies both parties.

Examples of when *compromise* may be appropriate:

- When the goals are moderately important and not worth the use of more assertive or more involving approaches, such as forcing or collaborating
- To reach temporary settlement on complex issues
- To reach expedient solutions on important issues
- As a first step when the involved parties do not know each other well or haven't yet developed a high level of mutual trust
- When collaboration or forcing do not work

Possible advantages of *compromise*:

- Faster issue resolution. Compromising may be more practical when time is a factor
- Can provide a temporary solution while still looking for a win-win solution
- Lowers the levels of tension and stress resulting from the conflict

Some caveats of using *compromise*:

- May result in a situation when both parties are not satisfied with the outcome (a lose-lose situation)
- Does not contribute to building trust in the long run
- May require close monitoring and control to ensure the agreements are met

Smoothing

Also known as *accommodating*. Smoothing is accommodating the concerns of other people first of all, rather than one's own concerns.

Examples of when *smoothing* may be appropriate:

- When it is important to provide a temporary relief from the conflict or buy time until you are in a better position to respond/push back
- When the issue is not as important to you as it is to the other person
- When you accept that you are wrong
- When you have no choice or when continued competition would be detrimental

Possible advantages of *smoothing*:

- In some cases smoothing will help to protect more important interests while giving up on some less important ones
- Gives an opportunity to reassess the situation from a different angle

Some caveats of *smoothing*:

- There is a risk to be abused, i.e. the opponent may constantly try to take advantage of your tendency toward smoothing/accommodating. Therefore it is important to keep the right balance and this requires some skill.
- May negatively affect your confidence in your ability to respond to an aggressive opponent
- It makes it more difficult to transition to a win-win solution in the future
- Some of your supporters may not like your smoothing response and be turned off

Forcing

Also known as *competing*. An individual firmly pursues his or her own concerns despite the resistance of the other person. This may involve pushing one viewpoint at the expense of another or maintaining firm resistance to another person's actions.

Examples of when *forcing* may be appropriate

- In certain situations when all other, less forceful methods, don't work or are ineffective
- When you need to stand up for your own rights, resist aggression and pressure
- When a quick resolution is required and using force is justified (e.g. in a life-threatening situation, to stop an aggression)
- As a last resort to resolve a long-lasting conflict

Possible advantages of *forcing*:

- May provide a quick resolution to a conflict
- Increases self-esteem and draws respect when firm resistance or actions were a response to an aggression or hostility

Some caveats of *forcing*:

- May negatively affect your relationship with the opponent in the long run
- May cause the opponent to react in the same way, even if the opponent did not intend to be forceful originally
- Cannot take advantage of the strong sides of the other side's position
- Taking this approach may require a lot of energy and be exhausting to some individuals

Withdrawing

Also known as *avoiding*. This is when a person does not pursue her/his own concerns or those of the opponent. He/she does not address the conflict, sidesteps, postpones or simply withdraws.

Examples of when *withdrawing* may be appropriate:

- When the issue is trivial and not worth the effort
- When more important issues are pressing, and you don't have time to deal with it
- In situations where postponing the response is beneficial to you, for example -
 - When it is not the right time or place to confront the issue
 - When you need time to think and collect information before you act (e.g. if you are unprepared or taken by surprise)

When you see no chance of getting your concerns met or you would have to put forth unreasonable efforts

When you would have to deal with hostility

When you are unable to handle the conflict (e.g. if you are too emotionally involved or others can handle it better)

Possible advantages of *withdrawing*:

- When the opponent is forcing / attempts aggression, you may choose to withdraw and postpone your response until you are in a more favourable circumstance for you to push back
- Withdrawing is a low stress approach when the conflict is short
- Gives the ability/time to focus on more important or more urgent issues instead
- Gives you time to better prepare and collect information before you act

Some caveats of *withdrawing*:

- May lead to weakening or losing your position; not acting may be interpreted as an agreement. Using withdrawing strategies without negatively affecting your own position requires certain skill and experience
- When multiple parties are involved, withdrawing may negatively affect your relationship with a party that expects your action

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