

CHAPTER 5



Constructive Conflict

Chapter Outline

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Susan, a member of a team working on a Web site for a small business, expresses her frustration with a teammate:

Susan: *I was really upset when Rene just went off and did a draft of the whole Web site. I was really aggravated.*

Interviewer: *You said before you had problems with the quality of the site. Is that why you were aggravated?*

Susan: *Yeah. Most of the project time was kind of like me biting my tongue to her because I'm not wanting to say anything to her.*

Interviewer: *What do you think would have happened if you had said something?*

Susan: *Well, she didn't seem like a conflict-like person, so I mean it probably could have been talked out. But I think it would have hurt her feelings, like her site wasn't good enough or something.*

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Susan: *No. I don't think she knows the rest of us were unhappy.*

Interviewer: *Now, several times during the project, Rene said stuff like "This is only a draft" and encouraged you all to make changes to the site or start over from scratch. What did you think when she said things like that?*

Susan: *Like "What's the point?" She already did it. It was supposed to be a group thing.*

Susan's comments point to what is the number one problem on some student teams — a lack of substantive conflict. Such teams suffer from a phenomenon called "groupthink," in which creativity and discussion become stifled in favor of a single, group perspective. Such teams suppress any disagreement in the name of group harmony. As a consequence, the team fails to fully consider the merits and drawbacks of competing solutions: the first solution proposed — and not the best solution — dictates how the team proceeds.

In contrast to the conflict avoidance frequently seen on student teams is **constructive conflict** — the healthy, respectful debate of ideas and competing solutions to a problem. Constructive conflict is essential for anticipating problems and working through the pros and cons of different approaches to find the best possible solution. As an operations research manager with more than 20 years of combined military and private-sector experience puts it, "The person who disagrees with you the most is the person whose input you need the most."

The term "constructive conflict" was coined to stress the productive, beneficial role that healthy conflict plays in problem solving. Constructive conflict occurs when two or more people who share the same goal nonetheless hold different ideas about how to accomplish that goal. In carefully debating their different ideas, these people work together to find an optimal solution to a problem.

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- **Present evidence and reasons in support of their ideas.** People engaged in constructive conflict do not make emotional arguments or insist that others should listen to them because of their experience or credentials. Constructive conflict involves taking the time to explain the reasoning behind a position.
- **Listen closely to others' viewpoints.** To show that you are a good listener, paraphrase the viewpoint of those you disagree with and ask them to confirm that you have accurately represented their position.
- **Carefully consider the merits and drawbacks of all opinions presented.** Ask the people you disagree with to provide more evidence supporting their position so that you can fully weigh the pros and cons of the issue. Make sure that you have all the information available.
- **Work toward a solution by building and improving on all ideas presented.** Don't just listen to disagreement; try to build on it. Take the time to understand the underlying problems, and use this understanding to think of new alternatives and approaches to the problem.

If your goal is to have the best product possible, you should welcome constructive conflict because it exposes flaws that, when addressed, will lead to an improved product.

One of the biggest differences researchers have found between student and professional teams is that students tend to shut down conflict prematurely. Whereas professionals value conflict and competing ideas as essential to finding the best solution, students often feel that the discussion of competing ideas inhibits group progress. In fact, on a list of problems that student teams experience, business researchers ranked too little conflict and shutting down conflict prematurely as the top problems ([Forman & Katsky, 1986](#)). In other words, a major failure of many student teams is reaching a solution too quickly — before the merits and drawbacks of all the

teams is reaching a solution too quickly — before the merits and drawbacks of all the options have been fully weighed and considered.

As evidence of the importance professionals place on constructive conflict, consider the results of a survey taken by 49 experienced scientists and engineers at NASA. These professionals, who worked on projects requiring both complex problem solving and technical expertise, rated the factors shown in [Table 5.1](#) as critical to the working of a successful team ([Nowaczyk, 1998](#)).

Table 5.1. Factors NASA professionals rated as important to a successful team

Factor	Mean Importance Score (1 = no importance; 5 = very important)
1. The team has enough time and resources to complete the task.	4.7
2. There is a sense of “team responsibility” among team members.	4.6
3. The team openly and critically debates various solutions to the problem based on their scientific and technical merits.	4.5
4. The team engages in “healthy” debate over various approaches to the problem or task early on.	4.4
5. During its lifetime, the team experiences a point at which it steps back and critically examines where it is going.	4.4
6. Working on the project is professionally rewarding to individual team members.	4.3
7. Not all team members may agree with the approach or method taken to completing the	4.3

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5. During its lifetime, the team experiences a point at which it steps back and critically examines where it is going.	4.4
6. Working on the project is professionally rewarding to individual team members.	4.3
7. Not all team members may agree with the approach or method taken to completing the task but are supportive of the team decision.	4.3
8. Debate and critical evaluation of members’ ideas are encouraged.	4.3
9. Team members take the time to explain their ideas and methods so that team members learn from one another.	4.3

Of the top nine factors identified as critical to team success, more than half concern constructive conflict (items 3, 4, 5, 7, 8). The NASA scientists and engineers in the survey highly valued open, critical, and healthy debate over various solutions to the problem. During such healthy debates, the discussion focuses on the scientific and technical merits of various solutions; team members take the time to explain their ideas to one another; critical evaluation of ideas is encouraged; and team members don’t take disagreements over solutions personally but see them as part of the necessary work of the team.

Not surprisingly, in a separate questionnaire, these NASA scientists and engineers identified the failure to respond productively to constructive conflict as the number one

identified the failure to respond productively to constructive conflict as the number one problematic team behavior. In particular, they were harsh on colleagues who “believe that their technical status insulates their opinions from evaluation by other team members.” This behavior was seen as a problem precisely because it shut down a critical and rational discussion of the merits of various ideas and solutions. Team members who insist on their own ideas without listening to the concerns and criticisms of their teammates become an obstacle to group success — no matter what their knowledge or skill level.

Clearly, these NASA scientists and engineers viewed healthy, critical debate as essential to a successful team. This same spirit of healthy debate is needed whether the team is refining a chemical process, writing a proposal to purchase new hardware, developing an online store, or testing the safety features of a new production plant. This chapter helps you distinguish between the constructive conflict necessary for good teamwork and the destructive conflict that occurs when team members react emotionally to criticism or refuse to reconsider ideas. This chapter also provides suggestions for creating a team infrastructure that will lay the groundwork for constructive conflict.

Although this chapter advocates constructive conflict, you should not therefore assume that *all* conflict is good. Constructive conflict is a productive debate of the merits and drawbacks of ideas in pursuit of the best solution to a problem. However, conflict can become destructive when team members refuse to reconsider their positions, mock or ridicule others, treat questions about their ideas as personal attacks, or use emotional appeals rather than evidence and reason to support their positions.

[TABLE 5.2](#) outlines the differences between constructive and destructive conflict.

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Presenting evidence and reasons in support of	Making emotional arguments; insisting that

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Constructive Conflict	Destructive Conflict
Presenting evidence and reasons in support of ideas	Making emotional arguments; insisting that others should listen to you because of your experience or credentials
Accepting questions and criticisms of your ideas as good for the group	Treating questions and criticisms as personal attacks
Listening closely to others' viewpoints	Rejecting others' viewpoints before you fully understand their position
Asking others to present evidence supporting their positions so that you can make a reasoned decision	Mocking or ridiculing others' positions
Building on others' ideas and suggestions	Ignoring or dismissing others' ideas
Disagreeing in order to find the best solution	Disagreeing for the fun of a fight
Being willing to change your mind	Refusing to reconsider your position

◆ **Creating a Constructive Infrastructure for Your Team: Five Key Strategies**

Unfortunately, goodwill and responsible behavior alone will not necessarily lead to constructive conflict. The following strategies will help lay the groundwork for constructive conflict in your team.

1. Clarify roles and responsibilities up front in a task schedule. Many unproductive conflicts occur because team members are unclear and anxious over what is going to happen next. Team members often have different work styles and expectations for the project; if they don't have a clear understanding of their responsibilities and deadlines, their work styles tend to come into conflict just when the team is under the most pressure to finish. As a consequence, one team member will usually back down and let someone else take over. In other words, the team will have maximum destructive conflict and minimum constructive conflict. Taking time at the beginning of the project to prepare a task schedule will eliminate unneeded tension.

2. Include revision in the task schedule and allow for plenty of time to implement revisions. If team members know from the beginning of the project that another team member will revise, edit, or critique their work, they are less likely to take such criticisms personally because they know that such critique is that person's job. Similarly, if team members know that the schedule includes time for revisions — and that they are *expected* to revise one another's work — they will be less anxious about the direction that work takes.

3. Lay some ground rules for conversation. Following are some typical guidelines for conversation among team members:

- **Set aside time for brainstorming.** During a brainstorming session, no
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- **Set aside time for brainstorming.** During a brainstorming session, no judgments or criticisms of ideas are allowed. The goal is to hear from everyone and generate as many ideas as possible before weighing the costs and benefits of each approach.
- **Get input from everyone in the group.** Before proceeding to any decision making, the project manager or a group facilitator should make sure that everyone has contributed an idea or opinion. This strategy can work very effectively with e-mail: team members privately e-mail their ideas to the project manager, who compiles them anonymously and distributes them with the next meeting agenda.
- **Restate ideas.** This guideline works particularly well when team members do not seem to be listening to one another. The group can establish a rule that after a person has expressed an opinion, another group member has to summarize and restate that opinion *to the satisfaction of the original speaker*. The group does not move on until that person's opinion has been satisfactorily repeated by the group. This strategy slows down heated debates and ensures that each person's opinion is fully heard *and understood* by the group.
- **Set time limits.** Tired people are more likely to go off on tangents or engage in other unproductive behaviors. Set a time limit on conversations and discuss in advance what will happen if the group still has unresolved issues at the end of that time period.

4. Decide in advance how impasses (stalemates) will be handled. Methods for resolving a disagreement when the team seems at an impasse include the following:

- **The group finds consensus.** Discuss the issue until consensus is achieved.
- **The majority rules.** Vote and adopt the majority decision.
- **The supervisor decides.** Take the issue to a supervisor, subject-matter expert, instructor, or other authority for a decision.

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- **The majority rules.** Vote and adopt the majority decision.
- **The supervisor decides.** Take the issue to a supervisor, subject-matter expert, instructor, or other authority for a decision.
- **The client (or target audience) decides.** Ask the client or a member of the document's target audience (that is, a potential user or reader) for an opinion. As one workplace manager said, "This is easy for me. I always just ask the client what they prefer." School projects do not always have a clear client or target audience — or it may not be practical to contact that audience for input. In such cases, you might ask one or more classmates to serve as your target audience and to offer their opinions.

5. Establish team priorities in a team charter or a project plan. This is a particularly useful strategy for large projects. For instance, team members can decide which audience for a document is their priority or whether conciseness is more important than including all of the details. When disagreements occur, they can refer back to the charter to help them weigh the various options.

See also [Chapter 6](#), "Revising with Others," for more specific advice on how to have constructive discussions about revision on your team project.

Works Cited

- Forman, J., & Katsky, P. (1986). The group report: A problem in small group or writing processes? *Journal of Business Communication*, 23(4), 23–35.
- Nowaczyk, R. H. (1998). *Perceptions of engineers regarding successful engineering team design* (No. NASA/CF-1998-206917 ICASE Report No. 98-9). Hampton, VA: Institute for Computer Applications in Science and Engineering.

Exercises

1. Reread the interview with Susan at the beginning of this chapter. Which of the five key strategies listed in the section “Creating a Constructive Infrastructure for Your Team” do you think would have been *most* helpful to this team? Why?