



Partnering to Solve Team Problems

by

Howard M. Guttman

The CEO of a \$5 billion pharmaceutical company was at wit's end trying to keep peace on his Strategic Leadership Committee. Team meetings were riddled with strife, endless debates and disagreements, and stalemated decision making that rivaled Security Council sessions at the U.N. Not surprisingly, the conflict bubbled over to the rest of the organization. Talent, high energy, and a track record of individual achievement were not the issues. This top team needed outside help and, frankly, so did its leader, to move beyond destructive behavior to a higher level of team performance.

By the time he called us in to repair the damage, the CEO of the pharmaceutical company, his team, and the larger organization were in real trouble. It's a common situation, one that we see time and again.

Leaders are paid to get results through others. At every level, from the board room to the project management office to the plant floor, it's the leader's responsibility to ensure that his or her team achieves its business goals. And, when internal conflict keeps a team from performing at its optimum level, it's up to the leader to see that it is resolved. Yet, the ability to manage conflict has never been high on the list of skills that the gurus and B-schools instill in up-and-coming leaders (See "The Leader as Conflict Manager," in *Leader to Leader*, No. 31).

As a result, leaders who have been promoted because they possess charisma and self-confidence, excel at strategic thinking, and have no trouble making tough decisions may have never developed the skills they need to manage the conflict around them. Some leaders are even the major *source* of that conflict. In either case, they can get help in strengthening their team by finding a partner from outside the team to work with them to address conflict and other team problems.

Detecting Trouble

Most teams aren't victims of the same kind of shock-and-awe conflict that plagued the pharmaceutical company's Strategic Leadership Committee. Often, the signs are more subtle, putting a premium on a leader's ability to read the social landscape. Team leaders need to distinguish healthy competition and confrontation from political game playing, triangulation, and subterfuge.

On any team, differences of opinion are healthy, beneficial, and necessary. Probing disagreements can spur effective problem solving and be a boon to creative strategic and operational decision making. Sharing competing viewpoints shapes and sharpens action by opening up thinking to new possibilities. Conflict can keep a company alive and flourishing—if it is expressed and resolved openly.

When conflict goes underground, it becomes a destructive force. Early detection is essential, especially in today's high-speed, horizontal, global enterprises. Smart leaders look for the "red flags" of unresolved, dysfunctional conflict. Some of the signs are:

- Decisions are made and agreed to in the meeting room, but second-guessed in the hallway.
- Team members complain to outsiders about others on the team or about the leader.
- Team members are reluctant to take a stand; conformity is valued more than results.
- Team members are unclear about their individual and collective authority.
- Individuals work independently, sometimes at odds with others.
- Information is closely guarded.
- Individuals view themselves, first and foremost, as functional representatives and only secondarily as part of a cross-functional team.

If your team exhibits these behaviors, it may be time to seek a partner to help you address the team's problems.

Where to Find a Partner

The company's human resources function is a natural place to seek a partner, assuming there is a senior-level HR professional available and able to step up to the role of authentic business partner.

Gerard Kells, vice president global human resources, organization and process design for Johnson & Johnson, is part of a senior team that we took through conflict-management training. Armed with the skills he learned during those sessions, he has personally intervened with other J&J teams when he noticed one or more of these red flags. In one instance, members of a cross-functional team continually sought him out for advice. They were unclear as to which decisions they could make themselves and which needed to be made by the team. There was also a great deal of confusion regarding the team's responsibilities. "Team decisions," Kells explains, "went

from picking the color of the carpets to approving capital appropriations and everything in between.” As a result of the team’s concerns, Kells went to the team leader and said he thought training was called for.

If you are lucky, you have on board an HR professional like Kells, who has the skills and won’t wait around for an invitation. He recognized the telltale signs of unresolved conflict within a team and moved to deal with it. He held up a mirror to the leader by providing feedback from the team about the leader’s behavior. The “reflected self” was an eye-opener, and the leader readily bought into Kells’ recommendation to convene the team for a quick review session—Basic Hygiene 101, as Kells calls it. In the session, which was led by Kells, the group agreed upon the decision-making and approval processes it would be using going forward, which eliminated a good deal of the discomfort the team members had been feeling.

But Kells realized that there was a larger problem that still needed to be solved: The leader and the team members had never discussed the way they dealt with conflict and had never set guidelines for the resolution of contentious situations. He recommended that the team go through an alignment—a two-day session in which they would take an in-depth look at their goals, roles, rules of engagement, and interpersonal relationships—and that the alignment be led by an outside consultant who would be viewed as totally objective by both the leader and the team.

When should you consider going outside your organization to find help? Greg Brewer, former vice president, talent management for Sara Lee Branded Apparel, cites examples of cases when he recommends that leaders look for conflict-management help outside the organization: “When I know I will not be able to maintain my objectivity when dealing with a particular issue or specific people—or when I think others will not perceive me as objective—I bow out. I recommend another internal consultant or an outside person. I also recommend an external coach when I feel that a leader has issues that require in-depth work, for which internal personnel don’t have the time or the objectivity.”

How a Skilled Partner Can Help

Whether HR professionals or outside consultants, partners who are skilled in conflict management and teamwork can play important roles in two ways. One is on the team level, opening up honest communication among team members and establishing the ground rules for team behavior. Another is on the personal level, helping those individuals on the team whose interpersonal styles are affecting team performance.

FOCUSING ON TEAM DYNAMICS

Gerard Kells of Johnson & Johnson focused on the team level in the example above when he set up the “Basic Hygiene 101” training program. In addressing team dynamics, the team leader and partner work together to help team establish clear goals/business priorities, define their roles and responsibilities, agree on specific ground rules, and set mutual expectations for interpersonal relationships. They also clear away obstacles that block open and honest communication. Robert Hoffman, executive director of organizational development for the Oncology Business Unit of the Novartis Pharmaceutical Corporation, recalls working with one team, before he joined the Oncology Business Unit, where communication on the team had literally shut down. Hoffman was enlisted as an advisor. “I began interviewing team members and learned that they

had just decided not to participate anymore,” he recounts, after a senior member had lost his temper, ranting and raving at his fellow team members. “When I reported this back to the executive, he was surprised. ‘Are people still upset by that? Why didn’t they say something?’ he asked me.” The team met once again, and the executive acknowledged and apologized for his behavior. In a subsequent meeting, Hoffman helped the group renegotiate their behavior going forward. “The offending executive wasn’t the only one who had to promise to modify his behavior,” Hoffman stresses. “The team members who had been unable to express their anger agreed to be honest and open about their feelings in the future. The whole team also agreed to set aside time during each of their meetings to assess how well they were adhering to the new rules of engagement.”

FOCUSING ON INDIVIDUAL MEMBERS OF THE TEAM

The second key role of a conflict-management partner relates directly to those whose interpersonal style is the root cause of team dissatisfaction and underperformance. Certain team members may be overly aggressive and shut down two-way communication, or they may suffer from “Superman Syndrome,” believing in the infallibility of their insights. In such situations, the partner can play a pivotal role in improving two core behaviors:

Changing personal style. There is a continuum along which people’s behavior ranges, from nonassertive to assertive to aggressive. The nonassertive individual, in effect, says, “I’ve got needs and so do you, but I’m not telling you what mine are. And if you don’t guess them, I’m going to hold it against you.” The nonassertive individual is Mt. Saint Helens waiting to erupt. At the other extreme, the aggressive individual proceeds on the basis that, “I’ve got needs and, at best, so do you, but mine count more.” This is the schoolyard bully in business attire. Both need to change their style if they want to become effective team players. Paul Parker, vice president of human resources for Colgate-Palmolive and a graduate of our conflict-management training, has personally helped several executives to change their style. Parker recalls serving on a team that was dominated by one very aggressive executive. The team leader was new, as were some of the other team members. Constantly pointing out his own wealth of experience, this particular executive dismissed the others’ opinions as uninformed. As a result, most of the team’s decisions were being made from a single perspective, and the business began to suffer. The business unit was at risk of missing its targets; sales were beginning to decline; and costs were increasing.

Parker, who represented HR, was also new to the team, but that didn’t stop him from confronting the executive about his aggressive style. After gathering feedback from each member of the team, Parker arranged a one-on-one meeting with the dominant executive, explaining why he needed to become less aggressive and more collaborative. “I let the facts speak for themselves. I pointed out how alienated others felt when he refused to take their opinions seriously. He was bright; he got it right away. We made a pact. I suggested that when he felt the urge to take someone to task or to cut them off in a meeting, he should bite his tongue, call on me, and allow me to handle the situation more diplomatically. After I did this a few times, he began to see the value in treating people with more respect. Once he changed his style, we became a real team. And we started to get results: Sales went up; we got costs under control; we actually exceeded our target for profitable growth.”

Learning to listen. Listening constitutes one of the truly remarkable human capabilities. Do it well and you likely will be not only an effective conflict manager, but an exceptional human being as well.

But listening isn't as easy as you'd think, and helping leaders and their teams develop their listening skills is one of the most important contributions a conflict-management partner can make.

Whenever a person expresses a concern or need, the listener must decode two things: the content of the message and the emotion behind it. He or she needs to get past the words, to the speaker's underlying feelings about the issue at hand. When we are truly listening, we let the speaker know—by our body language, our tone of voice, our thoughtful responses and questions—that he or she has an attentive, non-judgmental audience.

Greg Brewer worked with one team leader who “had a very one-sided view of life.” He didn't have very good listening skills,” says Brewer. “In fact, he wasn't at all interested in hearing other peoples' views. Feeling as though they couldn't get his attention, his team suffered from low morale and deep-seated, repressed resentment. In his role as conflict-management partner, Brewer was the logical choice for a sounding board, and he transmitted the team's complaints to the leader. As a result of the feedback—of seeing himself in the mirror that Brewer held up—the leader became aware, for the first time, that he hadn't been listening. Brewer coached him in the basic skills he had learned in his own conflict-management training: using body language to put people at ease; paraphrasing to ensure that he was getting the message; encouraging speakers to “say more” until they revealed the sub-text. Brewer concludes, “He began to see that his was not the only perspective. As he began to listen to other points of view, he began to see their validity. He began to accept the team's ideas, and its members were completely revitalized.”

What to Look for in a Partner

I have found that truly effective conflict-management and problem-solving partners, whether internal HR professionals or outside consultants, distinguish themselves by adhering to five best practices.

- *Proactively identifying the areas in which conflict is most likely to flare up.* Where do departments or functions interface? Where is responsibility fuzzy? Where are the critical handoff points on projects? Where is competition for resources greatest? Locating the hot spots, calibrating the pressure, and looking for ways to relieve it using tried-and-true conflict-management skills are vital services partners can provide to leaders.
- *Delivering feedback in a depersonalized way.* That means without finger-pointing or accusing, without moralizing or imputing motives. They base their feedback on data, talking to as many team members as possible to get a clear picture of what's been happening and how it has affected their ability to do their job.
- *Helping leaders to reframe conflict.* Rather than viewing conflict merely as personal disagreement, they contextualize it. They know that conflict will continue to be a

systemic problem if the leader and team don't establish clear goals/business priorities, define their roles and responsibilities, agree on specific ground rules, or protocols, for dealing with conflict, and set mutual expectations for interpersonal relationships.

- *Sidestepping the pitfalls that consultants often fall into:* having a personal agenda; not maintaining confidentiality; not gathering data before intervening; failing to link the intervention to a business or personal need; and making the conflict-management “monkey” their own, thereby allowing the leader and team members to avoid taking full responsibility for resolving the issues.
- *Modeling effective conflict-management behavior.* The best conflict-management partners lead by example. They are candid and encourage candor in their interactions with others, stepping up and calling dysfunctional behavior when they see it. They really listen to what others have to say; don't resort to passive-aggressive or bullying tactics to get their way; and give and receive feedback in a healthy, depersonalized way. They are conflict-management leaders whom other leaders want to follow.

Debate and honest confrontation are powerful forces for stimulating creative energy and high performance within a team setting. But when confrontation devolves into conflict and conflict moves underground, team performance suffers. While being close to a problem has advantages, it can also be a liability. It can blind leaders to the underlying dynamic of the situation and perhaps even to their responsibility for it. That's why finding a skilled partner to help uncover and address the issues may well be the smartest move a leader can make.

Howard M. Guttman is author of *When Goliaths Clash: Managing Executive Conflict to Build a More Dynamic Organization*. He is the principal of Guttman Development Strategies, a Ledgewood, NJ-based management consulting firm specializing in building high-performance teams, executive coaching, strategic and operational alignment, and management training. He can be reached at hmguttman@guttmandev.com.

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