

Management techniques focusing on communication processes can help you avoid disruptive team-based conflict.

# Conflict Leadership

## Navigating Toward Effective and Efficient Team Outcomes

Ana Shetach

Teams are becoming more common as workers join virtual, autonomous, cross-functional, action-learning, and many other kinds of teams. By their very nature, working teams are potential settings for varied professional as well as personal, ego-based conflicts. This article posits that management and team decisions, behaviors, and outcomes are a direct consequence of the nature of conflict-management—throughout overall team management and teamwork processes. It suggests easily applicable managerial techniques for harnessing conflict situations toward effective and efficient overall team results.

The following questions are discussed as well as some proposed insights:

- Can you learn processes and acquire skills to produce increasingly efficient and effective team results?
- What are potentially positive conflicts?
- What makes the difference between positive and negative conflict outcomes?
- How can you develop conflict-management skills?
- What is the role of team leadership in positive conflict navigation?

This article also considers the issue of interests and intentions underlying the management of conflict situations during the various stages of team leadership, within and among organizational units and teams. It provides insights to support the argument that team decisions, behaviors, and outcomes, are a direct consequence of how well conflicts are handled throughout the overall team process.

### The Nature of Conflict

Conflicts within working teams—often stemming from differences of opinions or incongruent interests—are fairly common. In particular, teamwork settings associated with assignment and project processes create suitable conditions for conflicts. Their nature, depth, complexity, the rate of the partners' involvement in those situations, and, especially, how well the conflicts are handled may all have a significant effect on the overall, ultimate results of the associated projects.

Handling conflict always has been a central factor in human life and history that determined the consequences of the particular venture. This applies to



all levels of human existence, whether political, organizational, or personal. Human nature, on a basic behavioral level, has not changed. Conflicts, with their direct and indirect consequences, still continue to affect the results of our doings on a day-to-day basis, thus impacting our lives. Within organizational settings, the fashion by which conflicts are managed has a direct impact on the overall directions taken by management and teams.<sup>1</sup>

Conflict is a normal state of affairs and is neither negative nor positive by nature. For the purpose of this article it is defined as “differences of opinions and/or contradiction of interests among two or more people, parties, or factors” (departments, organizations, nations, etc.). This definition is based on the assumption that differences among human beings present themselves continuously in all communication settings due to the following two basic reasons:

- First, interpersonal differences exist on every possible dimension—age, sex, race, looks, feelings, education, upbringing, experience, attitude, opinions, cultures, nations, religion, etc.
- Second, contradictory interests often are due to the affiliation of people with differing cultures, positions, roles, status, and hierarchy levels. They also are a result of association and/or commitment to a specific firm, department, organization, level, group, country, culture, religion, etc. On a deeper level, another factor might be people’s personal ego needs.

Conflicts are assumed to arise consistently among human beings who work with each other in any setting on the basis of one or both of the above reasons.<sup>1</sup> Whether the disagreement and/or the contradiction of interests will be dealt with constructively or steered in a destructive direction depends on the parties involved and how they handle and manage the situation. This is particularly critical in teamwork and project settings, where effectively handling each team assignment may affect or even determine ultimate success.

When two parties are communicating and a conflict occurs, as long as both sides continue to concentrate on the issue, they are headed toward a satisfactory solution. As they do their best not to get personally involved—and thereby lose their ability to clearly see their mutual objectives and interests—the process is bound to be resolved constructively. The same is true for managing

any discussion within a team regarding any issue or mutual interest. Keeping the discussion on a matter-of-course level increases the probability of a high-level, creative solution that is acceptable to all parties involved. Additionally, it ensures a cooperative relationship among the parties for the involvement of all in the future progress of the project.

Politics and power play a major role among people in any setting or level at work. The conditions for personally evoked emotional conflicts abound in team settings. Such conditions may include the following:

- As members of workgroups promote their ideas and opinions at decision-making stages.
- When highly cooperative activities are needed during implementation stages.
- During times of pressure-filled deadlines.
- When various stakeholders have high expectations for the team.

People who are able to develop their awareness and focus on their personal position vis-à-vis the conflict-evolution process have a higher chance of controlling the direction in which the conflict will evolve and, therefore, effectively direct the final result of the process.

### Team Management and Conflict Leadership

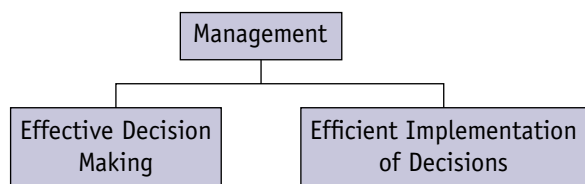
Managing teams is a highly complex assignment, often involving high organizational stakes and expectations, vast financial investments, involvement of numerous factors/stakeholders, and the ability to handle professionally heterogenic and diversified teams.

Yet, at the bottom line, everyday assignments and long-term projects are about attaining *two* basic *objectives*: arriving at optimal decisions and implementing them efficiently, toward obtaining goals and destinations.<sup>2</sup> Figure 1 (as well as Figure 4A) shows this basic conceptualization of team management.

### Project Decision-Making Processes

Adizes proposes that managers can be categorized according to their capability to view, analyze, and understand situations, problems, and assignments.<sup>2</sup> These different outlooks determine their managerial styles. The four critical factors by which managers can be categorized include the following:

**Figure 1: The Goals of Management**



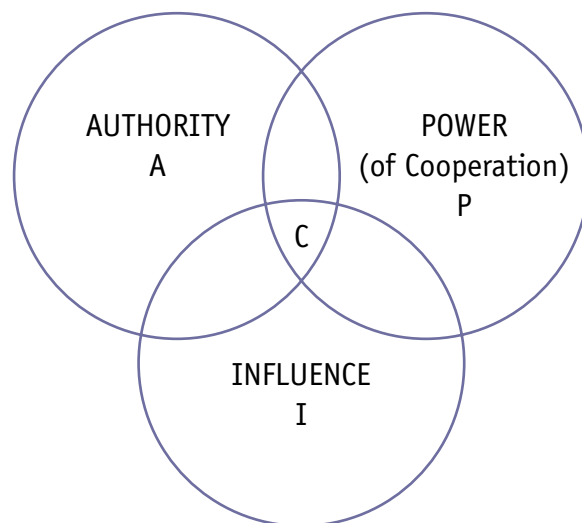
Adizes, 2004

- P—Doer, performer, seeing the world in concrete terms
- A—Organizer, bureaucrat, by-the-rules person
- E—Entrepreneur, creative, full-spectrum (macro) points of view, long-term perspective
- I—A people person, natural facilitator, good communications

A person's managerial style is composed of a different combination of these four traits. Each manager could be stronger in some of these traits and weaker in the others. The managerial capabilities constitute four different managerial dimensions or points of view. Combined, they create a whole multidimensional perspective on any issue. No one individual, according to Adizes, is capable of a balanced perspective at all times, or for a long time, regarding all situations. Team thinking and team planning are often required, especially in complex processes, such as project management. All four aspects of thinking are necessary to produce qualitative and workable decisions. Decisions, which are both qualitative and workable, require all of the aforementioned four capabilities: concrete and practical planning, organizational perspectives, a long-term creative and macro initiative, and people-oriented thinking.

Conflicts naturally arise when people with different managerial personalities are discussing an issue or an assignment. Different points of view and opinions are essential for problem-solving and decision-making practices within projects. They inspire and eventually bring about creative, quality solutions. The process by which these solutions are derived is bound to be complex, however. It will inevitably be "conflictual." Whether these conflicts will eventually contribute better solutions to problems and excellent project results, rather than accelerating toward disastrous situations, depends on how they are handled. Thus, the effective management of team decision-making

**Figure 2: The "CAPI" Model**



processes requires high-level conflict-resolution awareness and skills to promote the required collaboration among decision makers to make quality decisions.

Adizes' basic managerial conception (see Figure 1) implies that decision-making processes are cardinal in project management, but that without efficient implementation processes, projects may risk not materializing as expected.

### Team Implementation Processes

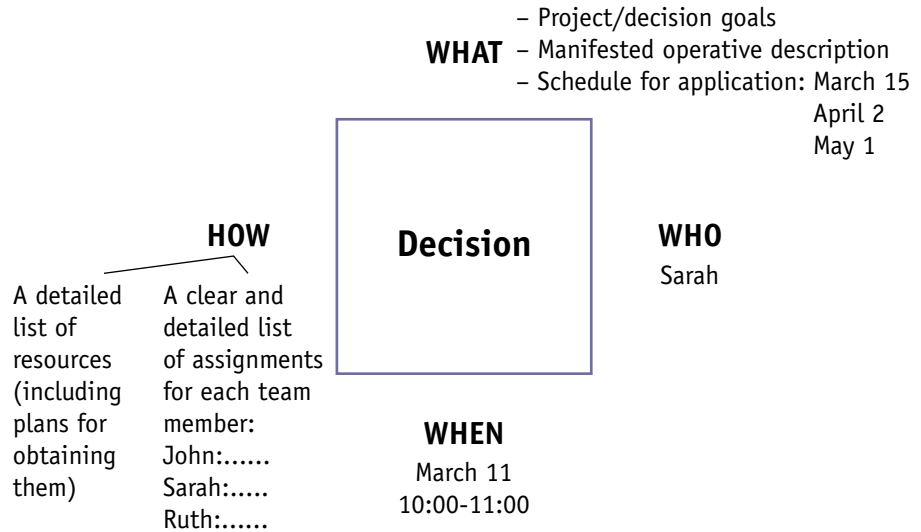
One of the critical managerial acts that can help overcome difficulties that may arise within teams during management processes of assignments and projects is the preliminary "mapping-out" of processes. This singles out in advance the potential difficulties and conflicts that may surface throughout the project. Shetach<sup>3</sup> proposes Adizes' "CAPI" model<sup>4</sup> as an efficient tool for this pre-mapping analysis (see Figure 2). CAPI stands for coalesced authority, power, and influence. It is believed that to manage assignments and projects effectively and efficiently, leading them toward successful completion, it is essential to coalesce these three forces (or energy sources.)<sup>4</sup> Coalescing these forces implies getting all the stakeholder representatives to collaborate in managing the project from its beginning to the end. This is necessary to ensure efficient implementation of all subsequent decisions and actions.

The CAPI model does this primarily by shedding light on all potential conflict zones and junctions and by proposing the optimal processes

for extracting better solutions and higher levels of support and cooperation in those potentially hazardous situations. These optimal processes ensure both the quality of the decisions taken within the project *and* the smooth process of their implementation. This applies whether the decision is a solution to a problem within a project or the promotion of a project as a whole. The elements within this tool are elaborated in the following:

- *The factor of “authority”*—The CAPI model advises users to verify in advance whether the project manager has the full authority to act independently upon decisions taken within the project. Likewise, any particular decision regarding a specific aspect of the project requires a similar advance verification to ensure its efficient implementation.
- *The factor of “power of cooperation”*—To ensure maximum success in any decision, the CAPI model recommends taking initial steps to ensure full cooperation of all “power holders” in the future. This ensures that cooperators have the necessary know-how and/or capabilities and/or resources as well as the willingness and interest to cooperate. In politics these steps are termed “lobbying” or getting your potential cooperators to willingly and fully cooperate when their cooperation is needed in the future.
- *The factor of “influence or information”*—You should also make sure in advance that the decision you are taking is a qualitative, suitable, and workable one; otherwise you might discover (often too late), that the decision was not based on the full volume of data regarding:
  - The nature of the assignment/project and/or its objectives.
  - The relevant environment within which it prevails.

**Figure 3: The Decision-Square Model—An Elaborated Example**



- The limitations and constraints on its “smooth” application.
- The resources available for the project (budget, manpower etc.).

A CAPI team includes the figure of authority, representatives of all cooperating factors, and all the people who have the necessary know-how and expertise to solve the problems and arrive at quality decisions. Such a composition of assignment/project teams ensures on one hand both quality decisions and efficient implementation processes. On the other hand, it is bound to evoke profound differences of opinions and contradictory interests among its members. CAPI teams are potential settings for varied and profound professional, as well as personal, ego-based conflicts.

To maximize efficient implementation, the CAPI model is coupled with the Revised Decision-Square model (RDSM).<sup>5</sup> The RDSM provides team managers with simple techniques to ensure efficient follow-up and control during decision-implementation processes throughout the project. This tool minimizes destructive ego-evoked conflicts and maximizes smooth, cooperative implementations.

It collapses all the possible variety of decision aspects into four categories that constitute the four sides of a square. Those decision aspects include the goals, a detailed operative description of the final project/decision results, a detailed implementation timetable, resources

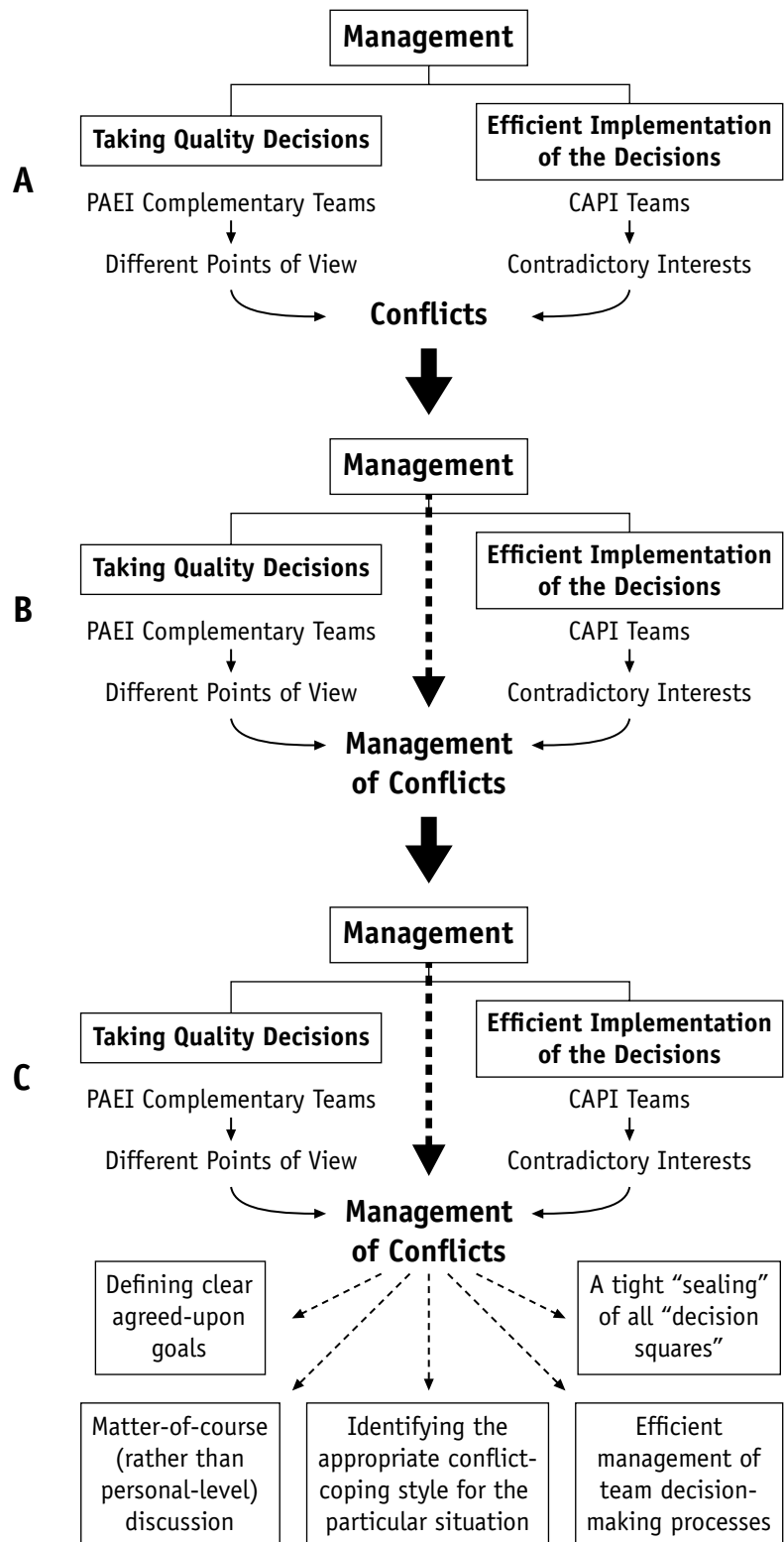
and processes for their attainment, and the distribution of assignments among committee members, as well as agreed-upon dates for future follow-up meetings of the team/committee. It also includes the name of the team-nominated project/decision coordinator. Figure 3 presents a detailed RDSM.

The RDSM states that the more thoroughly, clearly, and unequivocally you “seal” (specify in detail) all decision aspects, the better your chance of efficient implementation. It recommends sealing at least one decision square regarding that task or project before the end of every team meeting. Usually, more than one will be appropriate (e.g., a square per each topic or aspect of the overall issue or project aspect).

This tool touches on extremely basic issues, such as tying up all loose ends, ensuring clear and unambiguous communications within teams, setting follow-up meetings and dates, etc. Following the RDSM lead has significance in limiting situations that may evoke unnecessary conflicts centering on various misunderstandings, power struggles, and interpersonal differences.

The potential contribution of the CAPI model, coupled with the RDSM, is the combined ability to lead managers and teams through a comparatively safe route to successful assignment/project finalization and achievements. The two models meet this objective by maximizing opportunities for constructive and potentially creative conflict resolution processes while simultaneously minimizing time- and energy-consuming conflicts.

**Figure 4: The Interwoven Team-Leadership—Conflict-Management Model (TLCM)**



Based on Adizes, 1992, 2004, 2011

## The Interwoven Team-Leadership— Conflict-Management Model

Team management, in all its complexity and variations, is basically about the efficient handling of conflict situations. Figure 4 illustrates this notion. Team leadership is intertwined with conflict management as follows:

- The management of teamwork, assignments, and projects is about effective and efficient decision-making and decision-implementation processes.
- Decision-making processes are about creative team processes, which are based on the “richness” of variations in team members’ interpersonal and professional know-how and experiences along with their differing points of view.
- Decision-implementation processes are about handling conflicts, which tend to center on various misunderstandings, power struggles, and interpersonal differences in the interpretation of details within decisions and instructions, etc.

Figure 4C points out possible directions and tools that can efficiently direct the positive handling of conflict situations toward creative and suitable goal-oriented solutions and the promotion of overall successful team results:

- Defining a clear set of project and sub-project goals, testing, and retesting them at every junction for handling dilemma and conflict along the project process.
- Trying to handle conflict situations on a matter-of-course level (rather than letting them deteriorate toward ego-controlled power struggles).
- Identifying suitable conflict-coping styles for attaining the destined goals within each and every particular conflict situation along the project process.
- Leading efficient and collaborated team decision-making processes.

- Tightly sealing each and every decision using the RDSM 5 approach.

### Summary

Successful team management, regardless of the content or professional occupation involved, is about extracting and maximizing the potential essence of conflicts and of conflict situations within teams. Communication processes within teams are inlaid with conflicts—potential underlying differences, as well as overt contradictions of opinions and interests. Monitoring those and navigating toward desirable results is mastering team leadership to perfection.

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