Conflict Resolution—Part 1

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Whenever two or more individuals try to accomplish anything together, there will be conflict. Why?

Their life experiences to that point in time influence how they perceive things, including their agenda of the moment. This is not wrong—it is normal and natural.

Successful teams recognize that honest conflict is healthy. The organization would never make improvement if everyone were satisfied with what currently exists!

So, it is valuable to recognize and resolve conflicts when they are small. Doing so makes work more enjoyable and allows us to use our limited time and energies more productively.

You probably have tried to resolve conflict through the following three methods. Although tempting because they seem like easy ways out of the dilemma, each contributes to bigger problems in the long run!

Avoiding – In this situation, each person ignores the conflict or pretends it doesn't exist. Individuals don't look out for their own needs and sure don't seem to be concerned about the needs of other individuals involved. (We sometimes call this "lose/lose" behavior.) Avoiding dealing with the issues is the easiest thing to do in the short-run, but the situation usually gets worse and has to be addressed some other way.

Accommodating – Individuals neglect their own needs, working to meet the needs of other individuals involved. (We sometimes call this "lose/win" behavior.) Accommodating may work for a while, but the needs of the sacrificing individuals rarely go away. When they surface again or become intolerable, the situation is worse and the conflict has to be addressed some other way.

Competing – Individuals work to meet their own needs with little regard for the needs of others involved. (We sometimes call this "win/lose" behavior.) Resolving conflict in this way is prevalent in our society: sports, elections, and legal battles, for example. This approach relies on the use of power of some sort (rank, ability to argue, financial superiority, etc.). This may bring stability for a brief time, but the "loser" is rarely satisfied for long, the situation worsens, and the conflict has to be addressed some other way.

There are better approaches. They will require more effort and more time than the three temptations above, but they yield much better results over the long run. And they usually strengthen a team!

Collaborating – All individuals apply their energies to finding a solution that meets the needs of all individuals involved. (We sometimes call this "win/win" behavior.) This rarely occurs easily, but usually provides adequate short-term outcomes and excellent long-term outcomes.

Compromising – One or more individuals works to find an acceptable solution that partially satisfies all individuals involved. (This is a low form of "win/win.") A kind of a middle ground between "accommodating" and "competing", this approach addresses issues more than "avoiding" the issue, but not nearly as deeply as "collaborating". The parties involved may consider the outcomes "good enough", but the long-term health of the team would be better if more effort went into collaborating for a better resolution.

The key to executing successful conflict resolution rests with this question: "Will you agree to communicate together for as long as it takes for us to come up with a solution we both can support?" If the parties can agree to this, they are virtually guaranteed a productive outcome!

Next week, we'll look at the specific steps that the conflicting parties can take to achieve that collaborative resolution!