

Generations in Conflict

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In working with a recent client we encountered an interesting situation that seemed rather puzzling at first. The team was reasonably large, 18 people in an IT shop for a large financial institution. The leader, a 51-year-old male, told us the younger team members (which made up almost half the team) were high maintenance and working with them was like herding cats. For example, he told us that three members of the team had called in one Monday morning saying they would be late because they were driving back from an out-of-state pro football game “they just had to see!”



He was perceived as tolerating these and similar behaviors, which was causing older workers to lose motivation because they concluded that if any kind of behavior was acceptable, there was no reason why should they make a diligent effort themselves. The leader felt like he was in a double bind because when he had placed one of the Gen Y team members on a performance plan the gen y’r had spent the largest part of his last three weeks at work looking for a new job and left without notice as soon as he had secured one. The leader estimated his retraining costs to be over \$10,000.

When we looked at their TESI scores we found some interesting similarities and differences looking at the demographics. Pretty much everyone agreed that Motivation, Stress Tolerance, and Positive Mood were quite strong for the team. But virtually all the younger members were consistently rating the team low in Team Identity, Emotional Awareness, and Communication. Everyone also agreed that Conflict Resolution was the weakest competency at 53 (with a very small range of only 17 points).

In one of our pre-training meetings we asked the leader about what conflicts were most common on the team, and he replied there really wasn't much conflict, so he didn't know how to interpret that data. If anything there was occasionally some frustration between the 2 functions of coding and testing he thought. The way it worked in their shop was more junior team members were responsible for gathering requirements and the initial coding. More senior programmers were responsible for testing and integration, and he said he'd overheard some grumbling by younger team members that there were one or 2 testers who were always trying to figure out who specifically was to blame when there were mistakes.



During the live training we learned that the coders all work pretty closely together so they didn't really track their work that way. Because everyone was generally familiar with the entire workflow, if there was a problem, whoever was free at the time would take responsibility for making the corrections. We also had something in the data pointed out to us during the training that we had overlooked. One of the women pointed out that the females had scored the team very similarly to the Gen Y members and their scores were significantly lower than the men's in Conflict Resolution.

This turned out to be another one of those situations when the invisible elephant in the room suddenly began to appear. The leader and the senior engineers were older males for the most part and they had developed the testing process into several specialty areas and each one only or mostly dealt with the kinds of problems pertinent to their specific process. At times this actually produced a bit of a bottleneck in the testing and there was often conflict when that happened.

In watching the leader it suddenly became obvious that he was very uncomfortable with conflict and kept doing whatever he could to redirect the group's attention and thus avoid it. At this point we realized that we needed to change the exercises we had initially planned for the group around Emotional Awareness and Communication, which are often prerequisite skills for effective Conflict Resolution. In this case we realized that the leader and the team members all needed some language patterns they could use to indicate their confusion and/or disagreement effectively without triggering a defensive emotional response in their fellow team member.

We organized the team members (from different functions where possible) to work together in pairs doing nothing other than practicing their delivery of these 3 messages:

"We think everything works fine up to this point, but after that we're not so sure."

This communication was designed to indicate as specifically as possible where the effectiveness of the coding seemed to break down rather than making people examine large amounts of code that were already operating correctly.

"We feel frustrated because it seemed to be working (this morning; yesterday; before we added this feature; etc.)"

The rule was the first response the other party had to give was, *"I know that would be frustrating for me."* This gave both parties a way to validate their feelings of disappointment and failure without projecting them. Then the technical problem-solving could be approached more collaboratively.

"We want this to succeed as much as you do and if you don't have any other suggestions we might try X."



This communication was actually designed to help build Team Identity at the same time it provided a respectful way of suggesting a new course of action when the previous strategy had not been working. In the past, the need to avoid looking wrong had too often delayed implementing a new course of action.

When people perceived that someone else was unhappy with the way things were going everyone agreed to use one of these 2 response patterns right away: *“You feel worried because_____.”* or, *“You feel upset because_____.”* Fortunately the leader was willing to practice using these in the demonstration we concocted on the spot, and everyone saw him relax and feel more effective at recognizing and responding to conflictual situations.

One of the most important aspects of this practice was team members learning to observe and modify the nonverbal communication that people used along with these specifically crafted language patterns. Members of both teams had developed tonalities and gestures that were experienced as (and very possibly intended to be) blaming and judgmental. Just implementing this expression of respect and self-control was bound to help resolving, or better yet preventing conflict.

As an interesting side note we also learned that while the “football fan club” was driving back that morning the two people who weren’t driving were coding on their laptops!