

Team Conflict – Opportunity or Loss?

- Marcia Hughes, President, Collaborative Growth

[This article presents a brief summary of ideas from Chapter Seven of our new book, [The Handbook for Developing Emotional and Social Intelligence](#).]

Does your team grow when faced with conflict? One of the questions on our team survey, [the TESI®](#) is “Our disputes stimulate team productivity.” How would you answer that question about your team? If you find you and your team have room to grow, one of the key answers is to develop team skills in divergent thinking, which is the ability to think along different lines and to consider one another’s different perspectives. Conflict just is - what makes it useful or destructive comes from the attitude and capabilities of those charged with responding to the conflict, and that’s emotional and social intelligence (ESI). Seven behaviors required for team success are identified in the book I co-authored with James Terrell, *The Emotionally Intelligent Team*. These seven are assessed by the team survey associated with the book, the Team Emotional and Social Intelligence Survey® (TESI®). Conflict resolution is one of the seven skills, and it’s the one that teams struggle with the most.

In *The Emotionally Intelligent Team*, we discuss nine ingredients that compose a team’s skill in handling conflict. These include skills in the patience and willingness to work problems through, the ability to use the ESI skills of empathy and assertiveness, recognizing and working with differences in personality among team members, and the ability to choose different strategies for resolving conflict according to the specific circumstances of an individual event. For example, a team has to avoid some problems—it’s called choosing their battles. And there are times it pays to be competitive rather than cooperative or collaborative—although competitive benefits may be limited to a stimulating challenge such as the first one to solve a complex problem gets a free lunch. One of the most important skills for success is to be able to invite and consider different perspectives. This is generally referred to as divergent thinking.

At Collaborative Growth, we conducted a study evaluating TESI® results of team skills, especially related to conflict resolution to consider the relationship of conflict resolution to skills in divergent thinking and in relationship to the other six skills assessed by the TESI®. We found that there is a strong relationship between a team’s ability to appreciate and use divergent thinking and its effectiveness in solving conflicts.



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Divergent thinking is a thought process or method that is essential to effective team work because it's at the heart of the ability to generate ideas and to listen to highly different perspectives. It is often used for creative and problem-solving purposes. The goal of divergent thinking has several applications, with the primary benefit being the capacity within the team to think along different lines and to feel safe and supported in discussing the differences. It includes generating many different ideas about a topic in a short period of time and may involve breaking a topic down into component parts to gain insight about different aspects of the matter. In the best of circumstances, divergent thinking occurs in a spontaneous, free-flowing manner, such that the ideas are often generated in a random, unorganized fashion. During conflict, divergent thinking requires strength at the individual and team level to think about alternative scenarios even when there may be a strong temptation to protect the original way of assessing a problem. Working in an environment safe for divergent thinking supports Collaborative Intelligence™, the pinnacle of team emotional and social intelligence as reflected by the Collaborative Growth team model, fully described in *The Emotionally Intelligent Team* and at EITeams.com.

In the best cases, divergent thinking by team members or the team as a whole is followed by the ideas and information being organized using convergent thinking, that is, putting the various ideas back together in a new organized and structured way. Without divergent thinking, teams cannot reach the payoff of in-depth consideration before arriving at convergent thinking, because they haven't fully considered the problem they are seeking to address. Yet, diverse thinking can be difficult at a team level in part because of a process known as groupthink. Janis demonstrated the effects of groupthink by describing that even after groups become aware of the risks of an unfavorable process, they'll go along with it because of the pressure for achieving group consensus. ESI is a big help in preventing groupthink as being aware of emotions around the team, and having effective response strategies will support the courage to get beyond the compulsion to agree with one another.

Teams work best when team members welcome different perspectives and can feel safe in resolving conflict because they know that doing so can lead to increased productivity and a better work environment. Tips for growing conflict resolution skills are found in Chapter Seven of our new book, [The Handbook for Developing Emotional and Social Intelligence](#). In that chapter I summarize our research on divergent thinking and provide many ideas for helping teams expand their skills in working with positive and negative emotions.