

Managing Conflict in School Leadership Teams

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If you are a team leader -- a department head, grade-level lead, coach, or an administrator -- chances are high that conflict makes you nervous. It makes most of us nervous, and when we're in a position of leadership, there's an implicit understanding that we're supposed to do something about conflict. We may even worry that we contributed or caused the conflict.

I want to make something clear: It is your role to address unhealthy conflict in a team you lead or facilitate. Your primary role as a leader is to attend to your team member's dynamics with each other and to build a constructive team culture.

Without a healthy team culture, you probably won't get into the kinds of conversations that make a big difference for students because those conversations are challenging ones in which conflict will most likely surface. That said, let me offer you some ways to manage unhealthy conflict in teams that you lead.

Name the Conflict

Because many of us are afraid of conflict, we can hide in denial of its existence. The first step is to acknowledge that there's conflict in a team you lead, and to name it. It helps if you name the conflict as a communication dynamic rather than blame conflict on individuals. There's a difference between thinking, *James is so resistant to new ideas*, and *James makes declarative statements that put an end to discussions*. Identify the behaviors that generate unhealthy conflict and separate them from people as human beings.

Once you've identified the conflict in the team, then you'll need to name it with the group. Sometimes you may need to name it for them, and sometimes you'll see more investment from your team if you facilitate a discussion in which they identify the conflict. A team may experience conflict because the personalities of individuals are very different from each other or because they disagree on goals or action steps. Identifying the sources of conflict can help to depersonalize it. Sources can also include a shortage of resources or time, organizational politics, and organizational dysfunction.

Consider Addressing the Conflict Now or Later

When you notice unhealthy conflict in your team, you'll need to make an assessment about whether it needs to be addressed in the moment, with the team, or whether it's a conflict between two team members that needs to be addressed later. Most likely, you'll know if the situation is the latter; you'll have seen these team members engage in unhealthy conflict with each other before, or you'll be able to see the clearly interpersonal conflict between two people. There's a whole set of tools you'll need in order to address the interpersonal conflict later (that's the content for a future blog post).

Anchor Team Members in Their Norms

Hopefully, your team has some norms or community agreements for how members will behave with each other. Ideally, these help to prevent unhealthy conflict. When a norm is broken, you can remind the team of their norms and share the impact on the team when a norm isn't adhered to. You might say something like, "I want to remind everyone that one of our agreements is to assume positive intent," and that might be enough to subtly shift how a group is behaving.

Sometimes it's useful to name how the unproductive behavior is affecting the group by saying, for example, "When we interrupt, we don't get to hear someone's full idea. We need everyone to contribute and share their thoughts so that we can be sure we're making the best decision. If we don't make good decisions, we're less likely to get full commitment from each other. Let's be mindful of giving everyone the full time they need to express their thoughts."

If unhealthy conflict continuously surfaces, then you may need to go back to norms, and team members will need to recommit to how they want to work together.

Conflict Can Be Healthy

There's healthy and unhealthy conflict. Most of us are familiar with the unhealthy kind, but what does healthy conflict look and sound like? One leadership team I worked with identified the following as indicators that their team was engaging in healthy conflict:

- We wrestle with ideas.
- We ask questions to probe for deeper understanding.
- We change our minds.
- We demonstrate curiosity.
- We hold student needs at the center of our work.

This kind of conflict can lead to deep discussions that positively impact students. Having a discussion with a team about the role that healthy conflict can play, and what healthy conflict looks and sounds like, can help mediate unhealthy conflict and set the team on a powerful path.

As team leaders, rather than just stopping certain behaviors, our role is to shift unhealthy team dynamics into becoming healthy ones. Such an intention has transformational potential.