

Career Compass No. 40: "Why Can't We Just Get Along?"

In this issue of Career Compass, Dr. Benest addresses workplace conflict.

by Dr. Frank Benest

July 15, 2014

I manage a city planning team in a mid-sized community and report to the community development director. The team includes current planning, which focuses on development projects. There's a lot of pressure to approve the projects and get them "out the door" since our community needs the economic boost and the jobs. The team also involves advanced planning, which deals with large area plans; transportation, bike and pedestrian issues; and sustainability goals. Two key players on the team, the supervising planners for current planning and advanced planning, are high-performing in their own realms yet don't get along. In fact, they don't seem to like each other and the conflict has begun to hurt our group productivity and performance. I fear that the rift has begun to affect their staff who have taken sides, jeopardizing the communication and collaboration that we need across the two units and within the team.

In our team meetings, the two supervising planners often bicker about projects and approaches. When things get a bit heated, other team members withdraw. To make matters worse, they send dueling emails criticizing projects or plans being conducted by the other group. I don't like the in-fighting and assumed that these two professionals could work together even though they have different perspectives. However, I now need to do something.

Do you have any advice on helping to minimize the conflict so it doesn't continue to undercut our performance as a team?



"Yeah? Well...I'm rubber and you're GLUE!"

It sounds bad and it seems to be getting worse. I can understand your feeling that professional staff should just get along and avoid personal conflicts. However, ignoring this workplace conflict is not working.

There have always been conflicts in organizations. In recent years, conflicts have become more widespread and intense for a number of reasons:

- Local governments like other organizations have less hierarchy, have become flatter, and require collaboration across boundaries of units, divisions, and departments.
- The work often entails cross-functional project teams coordinated by project leaders who may not have formal authority over team members.
- Our diverse workforces include employees of different generations, values, cultural perspectives, and life experiences.
- Local governments are experiencing increased expectations to perform in spite of reduced resources.
- Our increasing reliance on electronic communications does not help us deal with issues of great complexity and

divergent interests.

Bad and Good Conflict

To effectively intervene, you must differentiate between bad conflict and good conflict. Unhealthy conflict is related to people fighting over position, power, or pay; seeking personal visibility; or currying favor with higher-ups and political interests. This kind of in-fighting is toxic and causes staff to take sides, saps energy, and undercuts team performance. Being nice and not calling out this disruptive behavior are very costly.

However, there is also healthy conflict. This involves disagreement and debate over ideas, ways of addressing difficult challenges, and pivotal decisions about priorities and resources. Healthy conflicts help teams to

- Come to terms with challenges that do not have right or wrong solutions,
- Ensure that key decisions are well-reasoned.
- Identify and mitigate risks.
- Promote creative problem-solving and innovation.

As Michael Feiner suggests (in *hbr.org* blog "Make Conflict Drive Results"), managers should view conflict as cholesterol: there is bad cholesterol and good cholesterol. You want to minimize and lower bad cholesterol and cultivate good cholesterol.

Once you differentiate between these two kinds of conflict, you must take action. It is your role as team leader to address conflict. Conflict management and conflict resolution are critical soft skills required of leaders. The question then is how do you start to address the in-fighting.

Steps to Consider

Here are some suggestions:

Get Some Assistance

Given that conflict management is not your strong suit, you need to get some help. Do some reading (quickly) about addressing workplace conflict. Ask a coach or a well-seasoned senior manager inside or outside the organization to give you some advice on how to proceed.

Talk to the Director

Since you are accountable for the performance of the planning team, I suggest that you share the problem with the community development director so she knows that you are aware of the conflict and that you have some ideas on how to address the challenge (see below). Ask for some advice and hopefully engage the director as a partner. The director may have some good ideas on steps to take. At the very least, she will appreciate that you are confronting the problem.

Seek to Understand

Even though we often think that rifts are personality conflicts, you must seek to understand any underlying issues, perspectives, and interests. I suggest that you individually approach each supervising planner, have coffee offsite, and ask each of them to clarify their concerns and issues about the big issues that the planning team is confronting, such as development pressures, economic vitality, walkable and bike-friendly communities, or sustainability. (If they get into personalities, steer them back to the issues and their perspectives and interests.)

To assist in this inquiry, ask open-ended questions, including:

- From your perspective, what are the big challenges we face?
- What are your ideas for addressing the big dilemmas?
- How can I as the planning manager support your group?
- How can the other planning unit assist your group?
- How can you and your staff support the other group?

If the disruptive behavior is a recent phenomenon, or has gotten much worse in the last few months, you must try to figure out what is going on and show some empathy for the other person. For instance, you can ask:

- What is worrying you about our work together? What do you fear is happening?
- Are there stressors outside of work that are bothering you?

- How can I help?

Emphasize Importance of Healthy Debate

As planning manager, you should discuss with the whole team the difference between bad conflict and good conflict and strongly voice your support for healthy conflict and debate about differing ideas, perspectives and approaches.

Insist on Accountability

In your individual meetings with the supervising planners, you can identify some specific situations where the conflict has been unhealthy and the in-fighting has negatively impacted the larger team. You can also suggest that the adversarial behavior is hurting their credibility and reputation in the department and the organization.

To promote accountability, consider the following:

- Let each supervisor know that his or her individual performance will not only be judged by the productivity of their planning group but also by their performance as members of the larger team. Include team behavior as an element in their individual performance evaluations.
- Identify several very specific behaviors (e.g., disparaging another team member during a meeting, sending hostile emails) that you will not tolerate. In other words, identify some minimal standards of conduct.
- If there are relapses into old behavior patterns, again meet with the supervisor and insist on professional behavior.
- If the negative behaviors continue, take progressive discipline (inform the director and ask the HR Department for guidance).

Use Incentives

As planning manager, you can provide incentives to promote team collaboration. These incentives may include additional budget for cross-functional endeavors, recognition inside the department and throughout the organization, opportunities to get visibility with the city council or professional groups, and merit or performance rewards.

Develop a Team Charter

I recommend that all teams develop a simple written charter in order to guide team members, minimize negative behaviors, and hold people accountable. At a retreat, focus on the team (not your normal urgent business items) and develop through dialogue a team charter that might include:

- Team purpose
- Guiding values
- Norms or expectations about behavior
- Operating procedures for the team (who develops and distributes agenda, how is the agenda structured, how often does team meet, how long are meetings, who leads discussions of agenda items, etc. (see Career Compass #38--"Your Staff Meetings Don't Have To Be Dreary"))
- Rules for engagement (for example, how do we deal with disagreements).

Once the charter has been developed, you and other team members can refer back to it when unhealthy conflict or negative behaviors occur. Some teams attach their charter to each meeting agenda.

Model the Way

To promote positive behaviors, you as team leader need to model those behaviors. For instance, don't start with your ideas; ask others to voice their opinions. In addition, encourage team members to challenge each other's ideas. Tell the team members that "I want your ideas. I want to hear different ways of addressing the challenge. I want you to challenge our thinking."

You can ask some clarifying or probing questions, such as "What would be the impact on the development community if we imposed these requirements?" Or, "What are the likely results of this proposed development on our community 10 years from now?" Or, "How might we make the proposed project or long-range plan even better?"

Suggest Some Behaviors

You might suggest some behaviors to the planning supervisors as the team debates ideas, issues, and approaches. For instance, they can ask questions instead of taking positions. You can also suggest that they hold back their opinions until other team members voice their ideas. You can encourage them to remain calm in the face of fighting language or, if they are feeling angry, they may ask that the item be brought back at the next meeting.

Of course, the higher the emotional intelligence of the supervisors, the more likely that they will consider new approaches and adjust their behaviors.

Whenever there is some improvement in behavior, let them know that you noticed their efforts and congratulate them.

Explore Converging Interests

You and the team might be able to identify some overlapping interests. For example, walkable and bike-friendly communities are not antithetical to economic growth. In fact, healthy and sustainable communities might support economic vitality. Therefore, you can help the team members listen to each other, identify different interests (not positions), and integrate interests.

One technique you may try is called "convergence/divergence." Where there is a difficult challenge, ask each team member to use post-it notes to identify value statements, ideas, and perspectives. By posting the notes and then sorting them, the team can identify themes of convergence and divergence and then discuss how to integrate the interests. You may facilitate the discussion by asking: "How might we achieve significant economic growth and promote long-term sustainable improvement in the community?"

Compromise or Accommodate

Again, depending on the emotional intelligence of the pair, you may be able to counsel the individuals about ignoring some opinions of the other colleague if they are unimportant. There may be room to compromise, such as the LEED certification of a new community building ("gold" instead of "platinum"), or accommodate some idea from the other supervisor that would not jeopardize the overall goal.

Provide Ongoing Feedback

Things are not going to get better overnight. As the manager, you must relentlessly provide feedback. If one of the supervisors interrupts the other one or rolls his eyes at an idea advocated by the other supervisor, you need to follow up and have a closed-door meeting with the offender. Wait a period of time so emotions diminish (but not too long). In the meeting, use "I" not "you" language. Instead of saying "You belittled the ideas of the other supervisor," you can say "In yesterday's team meeting, I noticed that when Joe was presenting his project your body language changed and you reacted quite strongly to Joe's ideas. I'd like to explore with you how you might express your concerns in a more productive way."

Other questions could include:

- When you interrupted your colleague, how do you think he felt?
- When you rolled your eyes, how do you think the other team members perceived the interaction?
- If the city council, city manager, community development director, other department heads, or department stakeholders were viewing us interact, what would they conclude?
- What do our stakeholders need from us to address the situation we were discussing?
- The next time that you feel irritated or put upon or attacked, what specific behaviors could you employ?
- How can I help?

(See Liane Davey, *hbr.org* blog "Managing Two People Who Hate Each Other.")

If Things Don't Begin To Improve

If the negative behavior continues, you must call it out during the team meeting. Again, you must remain calm and respond with statements such as:

"Marlene, I sense that Joe has more to say and you seem to be interrupting. Our team charter states that we encourage people's ideas, so let's hear Joe out."

"Joe, I sense that you are threatening Marlene's unit by saying that you won't have anything to do with the planning project. Why don't we all suggest some steps we could consider to minimize the concerns that you raised?"

Heal the Rift

Assuming that the two combatants understand the importance of minimizing unhealthy conflict, are concerned with how others perceive them, or at least understand your minimal expectations, you may be able to provide some opportunities for them to demonstrate that they can work together. Meet with the pair and suggest a simple assignment that they can address together. They can then report as a pair back to the team and begin to demonstrate their commitment to new

behaviors and to the team itself.

If they respond well to the opportunity, give them a bigger challenge.

If All Else Fails

As you proceed, you need to keep the community director apprised of your progress and any improvements. Assuming there is little progress, you must document continuing poor team behavior and notify one or both of the supervisors that they are not meeting your minimal standards. Offer your support or any resources (e.g., coaching through the city's Employee Assistance Program). If negative behaviors persist, you must initiate disciplinary action. Continued bickering and fighting have too high a cost and cannot be tolerated.

Conflict Management is a Leadership Skill

Conflict management is a key competency that will help you effectively lead your team. It is also a skill that will differentiate you from colleagues who are not adept at dealing with organizational conflicts.

Like any skill, conflict management requires practice. Over time, you will discover what works for you and what doesn't.

Finally, I want to emphasize that conflict resolution is a skill that will boost creative problem-solving. A lot of our challenges in local government have no right or wrong answers. We need healthy disagreements to help us discover innovative approaches.



Career Compass is a monthly column from ICMA focused on career issues for local government professional staff. Dr. Frank Benest is ICMA's senior advisor for Next Generation Initiatives and resides in Palo Alto, California. If you have a career question you would like addressed in a future *Career Compass*, e-mail careers@icma.org or contact Frank directly at frank@frankbenest.com.