

# Managing Conflicts within a Team of Writers

BY RAHUL PRABHAKAR

It is quite challenging for a manager to integrate a diverse group of intelligent and creative professionals into a single, cohesive unit. As much as you may try to avoid it, conflict among your employees is bound to rear its ugly head from time to time. While you may not be able to resolve all conflicts, with the right approach, you can manage many of them.

Managing conflicts within a team of writers is certainly easier said than done. When writers work in close proximity, many factors can lead to conflicts, such as lack of identity, recognition, and appreciation. Conflicts arise when people disagree on certain issues, such as beliefs, attitudes, or values. With writers, add egos to the list.

In a scenario where writers are jostling for recognition, the blame game can get dirty sometimes. The problem is accentuated because writing is not strictly quantitative in nature.

For example, one cannot say with complete certainty that X writes better than Y.

Whenever a conflict occurs within a writing team, managers usually have two options: conflict management or conflict resolution.

Conflict management is quite different from conflict resolution, both in scope and understanding. While conflict management is a continuous process that *may* lead to a solution to the conflict, conflict resolution leads to a definite, workable solution.

Potential causes of conflict include needs, perceptions, power, values, and feelings.

*Needs.* Ever wondered what writers require to perform their roles well? Ambience? Infrastructure? Remuneration? And are these needs or desires? While needs are necessary for our overall well-being, desires are things we wish for yet can do without. For instance, you might need a good system to work on because much of what you produce actually depends on it, whereas you might desire a separate cubicle so you can concentrate better. In a conflict, we



tend to ignore others' needs. As writers, we must learn to respond to the needs of others just as we would want them to respond to our own.

**Perceptions.** One of the root causes of conflict within a team of writers is perception, largely of *threat*. Most of us have a tendency to perceive reality differently depending on our situation. These perceptions affect our behavior toward others. For example, when a newcomer joins a team of established writers, the team may not welcome him or her easily into the inner circle. With the team dynamics already in place, there may be concerns about how this person will fit in and how the structure of the group might change. This perception leads to a certain behavioral pattern, which affects how the newcomer is treated by the team. This treatment may result in conflicting viewpoints and, possibly, a dispute over contradictory perceptions.

**Power.** A power play is one of the starkest reasons for conflicts. Ideally, a team of writers includes people with different levels of expertise, such as managers, senior writers, junior writers, and trainees. It is only fair to realize that not everybody on the team has the same power to perform certain tasks. How each one uses such power also determines the team bureaucracy. For example, during team meetings, some writers may be highly opinionated about certain issues. They try to gain an unfair advantage by using their powers the wrong way and influencing others through their actions. In such situations, a high risk of conflict exists.

**Values.** If writers working together do not share the same values, conflict is inevitable. Most people tend to mistake values for preferences; for peace to prevail in a team, the two must be distinguished.

**Feelings.** If the manager is not responsive to the other writers' feelings or emotions, it can become a major conflict issue. This situation often arises during peer reviews. Some writers tend to get defensive as soon as they receive a tough critique from their peers. A peer review is supposed to be tough! However, the



tone in which suggestions are presented is important so that the recipient does not become defensive.

As a manager, you use a logical three-step approach toward managing a conflict: analyze the reasons for conflict, determine the strategy for conflict management, and negotiate with the concerned parties.

### Step 1: Analyze the Reasons for Conflict

Okay, so you have two different viewpoints to deal with. What do you do now? Understanding how the conflict occurred is the first step in conflict management. Analyze what led to the conflict and how the writers in question reacted. Was it a private dispute between two people or one that involved other team members as well? You also need to see whether the writers in question are capable of working together again.

To begin with, you will find it helpful to be a patient listener. After an initial round of discussion involving the affected parties, ask a few questions that might help you ascertain the nature of the conflict, such as the following:

- How did the conflict take place?
- What is the main issue or nature of the conflict?
- Who is directly/indirectly involved in the conflict?
- Does the conflict directly/indirectly affect the work?
- Is there any past history to the conflict?
- What values were challenged?
- Is a negotiation possible? If not, why?

### Step 2: Determine the Strategy for Conflict Management

Your initial meeting will leave you with some important goals to accomplish. It will also provide you with directions for handling situations in a conflict and lead to a possible road map for the future. As a manager, you are responsible for choosing the best management strategy.

Some of the more popular conflict management strategies that you can use are accommodation, competition, and compromise.

**Accommodation.** The basis of this strategy is that working together to accomplish goals is far more important than sorting out personal differences. The underlying mantra is to accommodate all parties in the conflict. Use this strategy when harmony is critical and the conflict is not as important to you as it is to others.

**Competition.** This management strategy is all about power and goals. Sometimes in a conflict, quick decisions are necessary. These are the times when you will use your power to defuse the conflict. You can also use this strategy when dealing with a strong personality. Try your hand at bargaining and see if it works. The evident drawback is that bargaining can escalate the conflict even further and that losers may retaliate if they are not content with your decision.

**Compromise.** One of the fundamental management rules is that you cannot win everything every time; losing a little should also be acceptable. This management strategy conveys that. Place both ends in the middle and ensure that each person has something to say. This strategy provides temporary solutions to existing conflicts.

In addition to these conflict management strategies, there are ways to *avoid*, rather than *manage*, conflict.

**Avoidance.** As the name suggests, you try to avoid the conflict totally, as there are more pressing issues that need your immediate attention. Use this strategy if you fear that confrontation will lead to further chaos. You can completely with-

draw, sidestep, or postpone the situation for a more appropriate time.

**Collaboration.** This is one of the best management strategies available to avoid conflicts and reach a consensus. The premises of this strategy are trust, teamwork, commitment, and cooperation. Your responsibility as a manager is to instill a feeling of trust within the team. Differences in the team can result in creative solutions that fulfill everyone's goals. This strategy can work only if the affected parties take complete ownership of the solutions. They must also be ready to cut through animosity and hard feelings.

### Step 3: Negotiate with the Concerned Parties

The final step of conflict management is negotiation, which involves three stages.

#### Pre-negotiation

You must do the initial groundwork before the negotiation begins. Pre-negotiation methods include the following:

**Initiation.** Conflict always occurs between at least two individuals. If one of them indicates the possibility of negotiation, you must try to initiate a discussion. You can also call a trusted third party as the facilitator.

**Assessment.** Determine the issues that are negotiable and resolvable.

**Ground rules and agenda.** Set ground rules and request that everyone abide by them. Develop an agenda for issues to be covered during negotiation.

**Organization.** Inform everyone of the time and place, well in advance, before you call them for negotiation. You must encourage them to attend the meeting, and record the minutes of the meeting for later distribution, if required.

#### Negotiation

This is the stage where you bring conflicting parties to meet on the same ground. Consider the following aspects when negotiating:



**Interests.** Discuss the members' interests openly (such as needs, concerns, and so on).

**Options.** Do not commit to anything while negotiating. Give and take options freely, while focusing on common interests only. Remember it is always good to maintain two-way communication.

**Evaluation.** After you have a list of options, discuss each one aloud with the conflicting parties.


**Written agreement.** This is an optional step. You may document areas where both parties agree or disagree, then ask them to sign the document.

#### Post-negotiation

This stage is focused on monitoring the progress of the negotiation.

**Implementation.** You must continue to communicate and collaborate even after an agreement has been reached between the conflicting parties. Monitor the progress and success of their projects on a continuing basis.

**Separate people from the problem.** Attack the problem, not the person. Do not form personal opinions about the parties involved in the conflict.

While managing conflicts within a team of writers can be difficult, and these steps may not prevent future conflicts from occurring, this approach can help you do your job more effectively. If you follow a long-term, integrated approach to managing conflict, not only will you be able to retain your entire team, but you will also earn two of the greatest rewards for a manager: respect and credibility. 

#### SUGGESTED READINGS

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