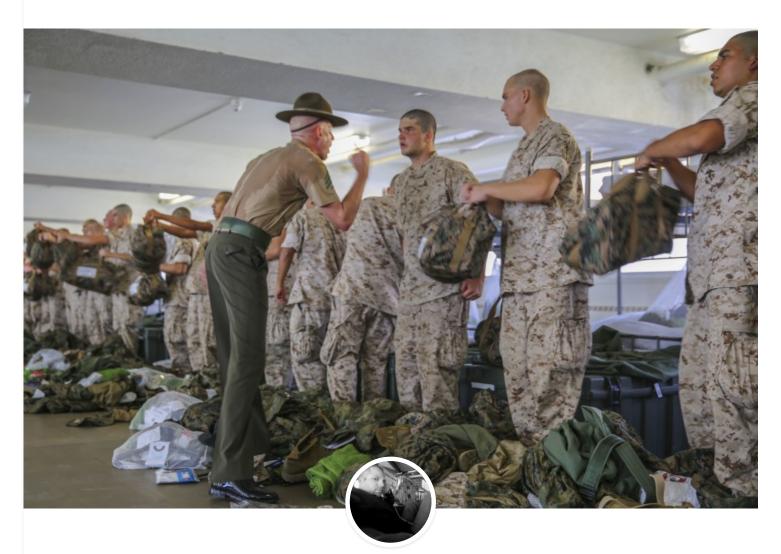Leadership

Strategies to Help Manage Conflict in Small Teams

by AJ Powell0 Comments7 min read

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As we have discussed time and again, conflict is spontaneous, dynamic and random. The ingredients for its formation are always around us, and we may never know when the spark might occur that sets conflict into motion. As such, it is imperative to understand that, how we frame conflict, how we coordinate and influence conflict, and how we identify with separate groups within conflict, are all interconnected concepts. How we perceive things, has just as much to do with what sides we chose to identify with, as well as the actions we chose to take. One of the most often encountered sources that drive conflict for teams are those where individual failures lead to team failures. And while it is not the intent of the individual to bring the team down, an individual failure still requires addressing before an individual can grow and the team can succeed.

It is in this requirement to address individual issues that the topic of this analysis is directed.

Without realizing it, most often the subject of a single conflict is altered or changed throughout the course of the conflict itself. As Folger, et. al. (2013) puts it, "Reframing of issues and problems is unavoidable as parties discuss them. In many instances, people frame and reframe issues without fully realizing it." (p. 91). Essentially, no matter where the conflict stems from, our independent understanding of the issue is always subjective, and as such, it is open to modification. As we relate meanings and perspectives to our own understandings about a conflict, we frame our understandings through interpretations and actions. As another variable is entered into the equation, our perspective is altered, and as such, so too is our frame altered. However, despite this, in order to resolve the conflict, all parties must at all times remain committed to its resolution.

So, in order to accomplish this, let's discuss a few basic strategies.

Strategy one involves the acceptance of responsibility. "Issue expansion may allow parties to save face by shifting attention to others' shortcomings, and enable them to point out that others share the responsibility for the conflict." (Folger, et. al, 2013, p. 91). Shifting blame or attempting to drag others down is never the right answer, and in the warfighter communities, could very well turn into grounds for an honor and integrity check, to dismissal from a team, or worse, revocation of qualifications and orders and removal from the community. When faced with a conflict to which an individual failure has become the subject of concern, the only correct choice is for the individual to acknowledge and accept responsibility for their own shortcomings, learn from them, and move on. Your job as a leader is to help them understand that doing so, conflict can easily be avoided, and they will show the team they're a bigger person, they're willing to improve, and they're committed to the team, the mission, and maintaining personal integrity and honor.

On the plus side to the shaping of conflicts within small groups of individuals, comes the limited variables within how the conflict is associated. Social considerations are not a factor as all are equal in the team. There should be no classes of social order outside of positional placement and the chain-of-command. The individual's sense of self is also a shared sense of team, and relationships are often direct. "Cultural patterns refer to a socially shaped framework for viewing the world and one's role and actions within it." (Folger, et. al, 2013, p. 93). The culture that exists within the warfighter communities is one where highly individualistic, highly motivated individuals are equally exceptionally strong team players. This culture is one built upon a foundation of trust in each other, and that trust is what can make or break the team. If that trust were violated, the culture would remove the individual simply because lives depend on that trust.

Strategy two involves taking the appropriate course of action. "Regulative rules specify what acts are appropriate given the nature of the relationship, the episode, and what the other person has said." (Folger, et. al, 2013, p. 94). When we find ourselves in a conflict, our actions are often dictated by our current understanding of both where we fit into the conflict, and the nature of the conflict itself. As leaders, it is important that we act in a manner appropriate to both of these understandings so that the conflict does not escalate beyond our ability to regulate it. If our own actions are the subject of the conflict, becoming defensive could only create more conflict. Likewise, if we are the ones correcting another's poor decisions, blowing the conflict far out of proportions could lead to far more conflict as well. Understanding our role within the conflict, the nature of the conflict, and taking appropriate levels of action will at least help keep the conflict within its current scope, helping to avoid escalation or the creation of yet even more conflict.

Avoiding the escalation and/or the creation of more conflict is essential for team cohesion and success. Conflict itself is often caused by physical, emotional, and even psychological stressors, but it is important to remember that it is hardly ever the direct result of the individual differences between team members. "Intergroup differences may be used by parties to justify the conflict, but they are certainly not its ultimate or original cause." (Folger, et. al, 2013, p. 95). We must always be willing to take a step back and reframe our perception so that we might find the root cause of the conflict and stay focused on the real issue.

Finally, strategy three involves remembering that we are all on the same team. "Although they may not be the ultimate or original cause of conflicts, intergroup differences often contribute to the persistence, intensity, and violence of conflicts." (Folger, et. al, 2013, p. 95). We will never move forward, progress, or succeed if we cannot at least remember that we are all a part of the same team. We must remain focused on the real issue at hand, never make it personal, always stay professional, and never allow the conflict to turn into

something it is not. Ostracizing an individual for their short comings will only end in tearing apart the team, if not immediately, down the road. As leaders, we must remember that we are all an important part of the team itself, and each individual member plays an important role in the teams collective success. So remembering that we are all in it together could reshape how we think about the conflict at hand, and how we approach and deal with it in the best possible way.

Sound Off!

Critical Thinking Exercise:

Take a few minutes to consider each of the three strategies discussed above in relation to intergroup conflict. Then try to think about a time when you either witnessed, or were a part of a conflict in the recent past. Did the conflict escalate into a much larger conflict as a result of not addressing it? Or did it escalate into a much larger conflict as a result of actually addressing it?

As a leader, in what ways do you think the strategies above might help guide your thoughts in future conflicts. let us know how you think they might help, or if you can add to them, what additional strategies or ideas you might add.

Post _YOUR_ thoughts in the **Comments Below**. Open discussion helps everyone learn and grow.

References

Folger, Joseph P., Poole, Marshall Scott, and Stutman, Randall K. (2013). _Working Through Conflict: Strategies for Relationships, Groups, and Organizations_. Pearson Education, Inc.

Featured Image

A drill instructor of Kilo Company, 3rd Recruit Training Battalion, yells at a recruit for his low volume during pick up at Marine Corps Recruit Depot San Diego, Oct. 23. Pick up is the first encounter the recruits have with the drill instructors who are charged with the responsibility of transforming the recruits into basically trained Marines. Today, all males recruited from west of the Mississippi are trained at MCRD San Diego. The depot is responsible for training more than 16,000 recruits annually. Kilo Company is scheduled to graduate Jan. 15.
Photo by: Lance Cpl. Angelica Annastas (23OCT15 – Released) (DVIDS)

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AJ is a retired U.S. Army NCO who served in both the U.S. Navy and U.S. Army. He is a combat veteran, and has participated in contingency operations around the world. AJ is the Owner of Veteran Leadership Solutions, the Founder and Editor in Chief of The Warfighter Journal, and is a published Sociological Analyst, Researcher, Guest Lecturer, and Public Speaker. He is a graduate of Pennsylvania State University with a focus on Sociology and a science degree in Organizational Leadership, and is published in the field of sociology. AJ is an inductive analyst; public figure; researcher/writer; aviator; a certified advanced operational diver; professional instructor, trainer, mentor, and adviser; snowboarder; motorcycle rider; world traveler; he enjoys long distance endurance events, and much more.