10 TEAM DYNAMICS FOR SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

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Research shows that team diversity can lead to creative development (Hambrick and Mason, 1984) and a higher level of performance (Williams and O'Reilly, 1998). Differentiating opinions, knowledge and background allow for a thorough ventilation of alternatives, particularly in non-routine, novel, and undefined issues. However, variables in a person's background (stemming in part from series of individual strategic choices) not only affect the generation of alternative ideas – they can also lead to conflicts. While team members with different and even conflicting perspectives stimulate discussion about alternative approaches and solutions to an issue, the way in which the team manages these discussions can lead to ideas 'outside the box' or to breakdown of team function. Facilitating discussions where opinions differ is challenging: if achieved, a team can develop a process that allows sustainable development of ideas, built through discussion, analysis and reasoning (Okhuysen and Bechky, 2009).

This chapter will outline some of the constructive and destructive dynamics that conflict can stimulate within teams. We will build from practical examples to explore approaches for sustainability within team function. Individuals within a team can learn to clarify and legitimize their perspective in order to convince others in the team, while at the same time the team can establish processes that allow for pluralism – acceptance and co-existence of multiple ideas and beliefs. A process that allows for exploration of multiple ideas, discussion, and argumentation supporting various perspectives can strengthen team decisions and proposals towards external actors.

USING CONFLICT

Conflict is often something that we try to avoid. When working in teams, conflict can make us feel uncomfortable, tired, frustrated, judged, unmotivated, and angry, among other things. Conflicts typically fall into two main categories – relationship conflicts and task conflicts.

Relationship conflicts result from differences in personality and value or belief systems[1]. Our belief and value systems, impacting our attitudes and behavior, stem from a long development period, related to the family and social environments in which we grow up. Our beliefs and values are often deep-rooted and thus not easily changed. Often, it is not immediately apparent if conflicts are arising from different perspectives that are task-associated, or if there are underlying belief systems that are being called into question. A first step in dealing with conflict, and using conflict, is to be able to differentiate between issues that are task-related and issues that are value-related.

In this section, we will focus on task conflicts – conflicts that can arise from the content of the task or the process through which the task can be completed (Weingart & Jehn, 2009). We utilize conflict as a point of stimulus – an indication that there are multiple ways to look upon the issue at hand, about which different individuals have strong points of view. Differentiating points of view can be based on facts, data, opinions and assumptions (content) or logistics and delegation (process). The first step towards working through differences is awareness. When exploring the commercial potential of early-stage innovations, there are some common points of departure. Let's call these the 3 C's: Context, Communication and Cloudiness.

CONTEXT – SETTING DEFINITIONS

When presented with a business idea, often the first task is to establish a goal or objective. But the question 'what is our purpose?' quickly leads to many other questions: in which environment, with what resources, time frame, cost, etc.? Establishing a goal requires discussion of the context in which that goal is placed. Many questions need to be asked and explored in order to establish a bounded working condition and a plan of action. Questions deal not only with what the idea will be shaped into, but how the work will be carried out. Depending on our learning styles and philosophies, we may have different ways of approaching the work process. Should the focus be on the first step towards success, or rather on understanding the ultimate result and working backwards? One team member may be focused on how to start a process, while another wants to understand what the team is to achieve and, based upon that, how the team should divide work – the typical doer vs. planner. Conflict can arise either when questions are left unanswered (and arise later on) or when individuals have strong opinions regarding how the questions ought to be answered. In both cases, communication becomes crucial, particularly in order to determine whether a strong opinion is based on previous data (e.g. when a certain process for approaching information gathering has been successfully used before) or is grounded in a person's belief structure (e.g. when it is important to the person that information is gathered in an ethical manner).

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[1] For further investigation into understanding behavior and emotion, see the literature by Edwin Locke, Albert Bandura, Icek Ajzen and others.

COMMUNICATION – HOW AND WHY DEFINITIONS ARE ESTABLISHED

When evaluating an idea, information is presented and prioritized in many different ways. Many times, conflict arises due not to the subject matter, but to the way in which the subject is defined or organized. Facts, data and opinions are presented through one interpretation of one team member, and taken in through another interpretation by another team member. Sometimes those interpretations are relatively aligned, but sometimes team members have very different understandings about what is meant by a particular word or phrase. The different understandings can be pushed further from one another when it is assumed that the meaning is 'crystal-clear'. Discussing an issue can quickly turn into defending a point without realizing it. It is important to remember that one or another opinion is not wrong, it is just different – and to discuss why.

CLOUDINESS – BASING DECISIONS ON IMPERFECT INFORMATION

For many, developing a business means finding answers to questions, and knowing that the solution proposed is the 'right one'. This is particularly challenging when operating in an environment of uncertain and divergent information. What do you believe and why, and when is there enough information to be able to move forward? One way in which team members handle uncertainty is to span from opinions to belief and value systems, which can introduce relationship conflict. Awareness of how the team deals with uncertainty, and attempts to establish boundaries and definitions, can be important starting points for managing discussions.

A situation common to Master programs involving real-world project work is balancing educational needs and project needs while maintaining a sense of fairness for different individuals involved: I will call this example 1. Student A is motivated to work in the project in order to gain experiential learning. This student does not care what grade the group receives, but instead wants to make a good impression on the different external actors involved in the project. Student B is also motivated by a learning environment in which theories can be directly applied and tested, but is equally driven by achieving high grades. Student C is taking part in the project work because the Master program will be a valuable addition to the resumé and illustrates quality and prestige. Based on their interests and motivating factors, the three students approach project and educational work with different points of view. Student A will work day and night to fulfill customer needs, and is not interested in understanding how a theory is being applied in a real-world context if it does not give immediate and visible benefit to the project. It is important for this student to control decisions that will impact the project's ability to communicate to customers and receive financing, and will thus prioritize meetings and time for applications above lectures or group discussions. Student C also wants to make a good impression, and be seen as intellectually competent by both external actors and educators. This student acts strategically based on the situation at hand. Student B is most concerned with understanding why theories and models are applicable to the real-world situations of the project, in order to be able to adapt and adjust knowledge developed in the education later on in the real world. Their different interests and motivations towards balancing project and educational activities affect how the students approach various tasks. None of their approaches are 'wrong', but they may be different enough to cause conflicts.

Some teams do not 'argue' or 'have conflicts' but still are challenged by misunderstanding and can benefit from increased communication: I will call this example 2. A team of three students, two of whom are Swedish students and one is an international student, work together on a business development project. For several months, the team has functioned well, agreeing upon how to divide work among them, with each student eventually having a specific role around a designated area – finances, marketing and technology. However, the two Swedish students start to notice that the international student is increasingly quiet and seems disengaged, often working independently from home. The two Swedish students are both frustrated about the lack of motivation of their teammate, but also feel they have so many activities to manage that they push forward. Near the end of the project period, the team meets with a coach. During their meeting, the topic of work load and work efficiency is discussed. Through this discussion, one of the Swedish students openly questions the international student about the observed lack of engagement and perceived lack of motivation. The international student starts to explain that the role given was not a motivating role, but the student accepted it because the other two teammates were so enthusiastic about their roles and felt that they could develop their strengths. The international student felt that the remaining role was not an area in which the student was especially competent, and this student found it difficult to produce good work. However, the student did not raise the issue with the group because the student perceived that the other two enjoyed their positions and that discussion would require time that could be utilized in different activities for the project. Thus the international student decided to do the best job possible until the end of the project period. The two Swedish students started to reflect back on the different dialogues of the past few months and realized that they also had not taken the time to discuss roles or motivation for the roles, and had just assumed that everything was okay. They reflected upon being so focused towards their own activities that they did not recognize the international student's slow loss of motivation over the period. The members started to talk through all the assumptions they had made and listen to each other's interpretations of different meetings they had, and realized that they had drawn different conclusions from the same situation because they had not fully understood the perspective of other individuals in the group.

Both examples illustrate the importance of the three C's. The students in the teams needed to ask questions of one another, such as 'what is important', 'when and how often should norms be discussed and revised', 'what is good enough', and 'how is each person motivated', in order to further understand the different perspectives of each individual. Then the team members can utilize this information to allocate roles and responsibilities so that each individual is motivated, recognizing where trade-offs between one option and another may need to be made. Using the framework of the three C's often requires investments of time – not just to discuss, but to clarify different points of view, and to verify points of view periodically through the life of the team. The teams utilize communication of their understanding (interpretation of something uncertain) within a context in order to educate the other individuals in the team about their way of seeing things. Example 1 illustrates how different goals impact motivation. The team can then explore different options for approaching activities of the project in a way which fulfills the motivation of each individual, or which will require managing different trade-offs. Example 2 shows how the existing context that each individual brings, for example a cultural perspective, can shape how different contributions are valued/appreciated: what is done to understand these differences? Differentiating between individuals and their culture, their educational background, and items

that 'define' them is extremely difficult. The three C's can be used as a framework to investigate and potentially identify differences and understand why differences might exist. In Example 2, the team could have communicated a basis for assigning the roles – the competences of the individual (i.e. the outgoing, extroverted individual is responsible for customer relationships), the educational background (i.e. the individual with economics education is responsible for finance), the interest area (i.e. an individual with a background in technology wants to learn more about finance, so is motivated to work in that role rather than a technology-responsible role), etc., and discussed this in relation to the context of the project – a limited amount of time to get things accomplished, a learning environment that will at one point transition into a business or market environment, etc. – and the trade-offs that need to be made relative to individual interest, motivation and the collective needs of the team and the project based on the context.

After using the three C's to help identify differences, our next step is to determine how to deal with the differentiating points of view. But before we start, it is important to take a little side step and discuss our tendencies to avoid conflict. It is quite common when working in a team, particularly when we know that there is a definitive time period for the work, to choose not to express and/or argue for our positions. Sometimes this is due to time constraints. Other times, it is because there is no established leader or hierarchy in the team and we want to ensure a smooth process (cooperation). Awareness of how our engagement can impact the process and outcome of the team activity is important, but sometimes not engaging can be more detrimental than the alternative (Okhuysen and Bechky, 2009). A team can invest time in the beginning of the work process to establish common norms that will guide how the team collectively wants members to contribute, including providing space and time for open discussions, but also determining how to summarize or conclude these discussions if decisions need to be made.

Using group norms as an established framework for team discussions, the following approaches can be used to investigate different points of view. Investigation can provide additional understanding about the perspectives presented that can lead to better-informed decisions and recognition of the contributions of team members.

SETTING AND EXPLAINING DEFINITIONS

Making assumptions from the start, when working with persons with different backgrounds, experiences, etc., can lead to different individuals in a team thinking and working along divergent paths – this is the fundamental problem of conflicting assumptions (Shani and Lau, 2005). Establishing definitions and clarifying assumptions at the outset can help to put everyone into a common context. Even the very first discussion of what the task is requires clarification within the group. Taking the time to discuss assumptions and interpretations can provide insight into where there are natural alignments of 'fact' and 'opinion' and where there are divergent views. Taking note of the similarities and differences in the collective attributes of the team can be important to remember when engaged in discussions later on in the team process. Remembering that individuals think about certain meanings in different ways can allow team members to shape communication differently through asking for clarification and exploring how someone else understands something.

ADVOCACY AND INQUIRY

A particular method for investigating meaning is called 'advocacy and inquiry'[2]. Advocacy means presenting support for a particular idea in a way that can convince the other party. Effective advocacy involves understanding the position of the person(s) being spoken to and providing them with the information they require so that they are satisfied. Inquiry is asking questions that draw out critical information which can be vital in providing understanding and transforming a discussion. Advocacy and inquiry can be utilized together to 'dig beneath the surface' when an apparent conflict has emerged. Both build upon taking a 'learning' perspective: being curious and wanting to know more about the other person(s)' point of view.

STRENGTH-BASED FOCUS

There are often multiple paths that a team can take to fulfill a task. Understanding the strengths that exist within the team and how they can be utilized should help the team determine the best processes for achieving the task in a way in which team members feel comfortable – as they are building upon existing competences – and appreciated for the contribution they bring to the task performed (Okhuysen and Bechky, 2009). Building on strengths can also help the team make choices when faced with uncertainty.

CREATING WIN-WIN SITUATIONS

Different perspectives can quickly transition into defending different positions, where a discussion turns into a negotiation with a winner and a loser. Instead, a team can choose to expand the perspective to see how many of the ideas and opinions can be collectively incorporated into a decision, creating a situation in which everyone 'wins' (Thompson, 2001). Getting to a 'win-win' situation builds upon some of the approaches already mentioned, including understanding and clarifying definitions and assumptions as well as inquiring after their interests and advocating why a certain perspective could be good for everyone. Active listening and openness to all choices available help to objectify the issues at hand, positioning the team as partners collaborating in finding a solution.

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[2] Advocacy and inquiry have been written about extensively by, among others, Peter Senge et al. in *The Fifth Discipline: A Fieldbook* (1994), Doubleday; and Mark Gerzon in *Leading Through Conflict* (2006), HBS Press.

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