

Managing conflicts across Cross Functional and Global Virtual Teams

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ABSTRACT

Almost all of us work with people situated around the globe, and some of those people are home based and some are office based. For various reasons like improve efficiency, process flow, decision making, etc. organizations are now moving to teams that are made up of representatives from various functions and these teams are called as Cross Functional teams. The representatives from various functions on the team work with people from other functions and they are expected to blend in their collective expertise to come up with well thought out solutions, ideas and decisions. Quite often such teams run into problems and are unable to work to their full potential because of inherent relationship issues. The lack of co-operation soon becomes apparent when the team members work at cross purposes. In reality, functions or departments gradually become so full of themselves that they become a mini-organization within an organization. They compartmentalize themselves and start operating as distinct groups. This division brings about a feeling of 'us versus them'. Cross functional conflict and the failure to work well together arises when departmental functions operate in a manner that isolates them from the problems and concerns of their fellow workers.

The authors of this paper have experience in working in Cross functional teams and global virtual teams and would like to share some learnings on how to manage conflicts and some rules that may help cross functional and also some ideas on conflict management across global virtual teams.

INTRODUCTION

Teamwork is the most efficient, stimulating, enjoyable way to get the work done. In recent decades, team doesn't necessarily mean same group sitting at same place. So when we say team of geographically dispersed employees who are assembled using a combination of telecommunication and information technologies then we call the team as Global Virtual team, and to add a bit more complexity this team could comprise of people from different functions, but accountable to achieve a common goal and hence the team is also called as Cross Functional Team. Due to complexity and diversity of global multi-functional teams, sometimes discussions may lead to difference in opinions and at times even conflicts. In order to create a high performing and successful team advance planning and on-going attention to the group dynamics is required and just combining individuals with specific skill sets in a group will not guarantee great results. One of the many challenges of managing these teams is conflict management.

It's true that conflict is an inevitable part of any organization. At the same time conflicts are a normal, and even healthy, part of relationships. After all, everyone can't be expected to agree on everything at all times. Since relationship conflicts are inevitable, learning to deal with them in a healthy way is crucial. When conflict is mismanaged, it can harm the relationship. But when handled in a respectful and positive way, conflict provides an opportunity for growth, ultimately strengthening the bond between two people. By learning the skills you need for successful conflict resolution, you can keep your personal and professional relationships strong and growing.

CROSS FUNCTIONAL VIRTUAL TEAMS AND TYPES OF CONFLICTS

Cross functional virtual team can be described as group of people who work interdependently with a shared goal across space, time and organization boundaries by using the latest information and communication technology (ICT).

Working in a Cross Functional Team seems ideal and most of the time it is. Some of the advantages of cross functional teams:

- Improved process development and better communication.
- Greater involvement and collaboration of various departments in decision-making.
- A well-formed team can reduce project time, improve quality, and increase efficiency
- Increased creativity and cost reduction.

As described above cross functional teams are easily prone to conflicts their structural complexity. Before we talk about conflicts lets understand different types of conflicts. We can divide conflicts into 3 types:

(1). **Intrapersonal:** is when you have internal conflict about yourself, your actions, thoughts, feelings, values, etc. Conflict within a person is not always easy to identify, but it can become apparent when mood swings are present or depression is evident. Intrapersonal conflict is also apparent when a person has trouble choosing between two or more goals. Most of us do not possess the skills to handle serious intrapersonal conflicts; therefore referring your afflicted employee to a trained professional is the best way to handle this problem.

(2). **Interpersonal:** Conflict between two people is not always bad, particularly if the differences can be resolved. People respond in different ways to disagreements, with personal feelings, attitudes and goals contributing to the conflict. As a small business manager, you want your employees to settle their differences without your personal intervention, but sometimes you need to step in. This kind of conflict may be resolved by collaboration or compromise.

(3).**Intergroup:** This is most common type of conflict. Intergroup relations between two or more groups and their respective members are often necessary to complete the work required to operate a business. Many times, groups inter-relate to accomplish the organization's goals and objectives, and conflict can occur. Some conflict, called functional conflict, is considered positive, because it enhances performance and identifies weaknesses. Dysfunctional conflict, however, is confrontation or interaction between groups that harms the organization or hinders attainment of goals or objectives.

Causes of Intergroup Conflict:

One of the most prominent reasons for intergroup conflict is simply the nature of the group. Other reasons may be work interdependence, goal variances, differences in perceptions, and the increased demand for specialists. When groups share some interests and their directions seem parallel, each group may view the other positively; however, if the activities and goals of groups differ, they may view each other in a negative manner. When trying to prevent or correct intergroup conflict, it is important to consider the history of relations between the groups in conflict.

Limited resources and reward structures can foster intergroup conflict by making the differences in group goals more apparent. Differences in perceptions among groups regarding time and status, when coupled with different group goals, can also create conflict. Reorganization of the workplace and integration of services and facilities can be stressful to some and create negative conflict. Some individuals within the group have inherent traits or social histories that impact intergroup conflict, but problems within intergroup relations are not usually caused by the deviate behavior of a few individuals.

Consequences of Intergroup Conflict

Intergroup conflict causes changes to occur, both within the groups in conflict and between them. Within the groups, members will usually overlook individual differences in an effort to unite against the other side, and with this concerted effort the focus is on the task. The group can become more efficient and effective at what they do, and members can become more loyal, closely following group norms. Problems can occur, however, when the group loses focus of the organization's goals and becomes closed off from other groups. This can quickly lead to decreased communication. Communication is the key between groups in reciprocal interdependence, and these have the highest negative consequences for lack of effective communication.

Solutions to Intergroup Conflict

Conflicts within or between groups can be destructive or constructive, depending on how the conflict is handled. There are numerous choices available to circumvent conflict, to keep it from becoming damaging, and to resolve conflict that is more serious. These include simple avoidance where possible, problem solving, changing certain variables in the workplace etc. Any resolution method should depend on why the conflict occurred, the seriousness of the conflict, and the type.

Where groups have differing goals, it may be prudent to establish some type of goal that can only be reached when the conflicting groups work together. A superordinate goal not only helps alleviate conflict, it focuses more on performance, which is what the organization needs to survive.

Another solution to conflict is simply avoiding it. Although this does not resolve the problem, it can help get a group through a period of time, in which those involved may become more objective, or a greater,

more immediate goal would have been met. Along those lines, another solution is smoothing the groups by focusing on common interests and de-emphasizing the differences between them. This approach is especially effective on relatively simple conflicts and is viewed as a short-term remedy.

Yet another quick fix is the authoritative command, where groups, who cannot satisfactorily resolve their conflict, are commanded by management. This response does not usually deal with the underlying cause of the conflict, which is likely to surface again in some way. This would probably be a choice of last resort.

Although it is not always possible to change a person's behavior, by focusing on the cause of the conflict and the attitudes of those involved, it will lead to a more permanent resolution. It is also possible to change the structural variables involving the conflicting groups, such as changing jobs or rearranging reporting responsibilities. This approach is much more effective when the groups themselves participate in structural change decisions. Without meaningful input, this resolution method resembles avoidance or forcing and is not likely to succeed, further frustrating all involved.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION: UNDERSTANDING THOMAS-KILMANN CONFLICT MODE INSTRUMENT (TKI)

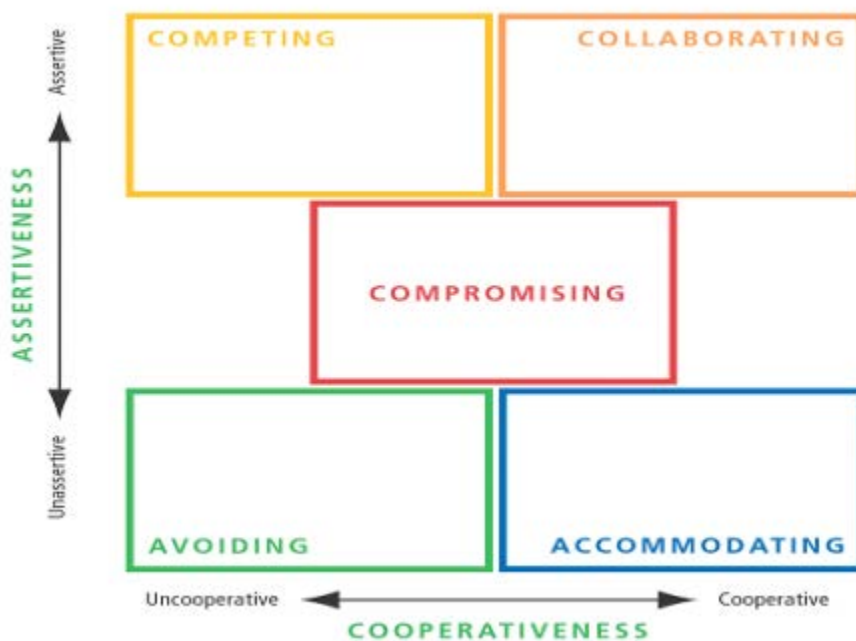


Figure1 : Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Model

The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Model which identifies and defines 5 main conflict resolution styles. Thomas and Kilmann observed that in conflict individuals is either trying to be:

1. Assertive: satisfying own concerns
2. Cooperative: satisfying the other person's concerns
3. Assertive and Cooperative: combining both

THE FIVE STYLES USED TO MANAGE CONFLICT

(1). Avoiding (low assertiveness and low cooperation): *"I'll think about it tomorrow"*

Avoiding is unassertive and uncooperative. When avoiding, an individual does not immediately pursue his or her own concerns or those of the other person. He or she does not address the conflict. Avoiding might take the form of a diplomatically sidestepping an issue, postponing an issue until a better time, or simply withdrawing from a threatening situation.

Situations when Avoiding may be an option are:

- When an issue is unimportant or when other, more important issues are pressing
- When you perceive no chance of satisfying your concerns—for example, when you have low power or you are frustrated by something that would be very difficult to change.
- When the potential costs of confronting a conflict outweigh the benefits of its resolution
- When you need to let people cool down—to reduce tensions to a productive level and to regain perspective and composure
- When gathering more information outweighs the advantages of an immediate decision
- When others can resolve the issue more effectively
- When the issue seems tangential or symptomatic of another, more basic issue

(2). Accommodating: (Low assertiveness and high cooperation): ***“It would be my pleasure”***

When accommodating, an individual neglects his or her own concerns to satisfy the concerns of the other person; there is an element of self-sacrifice in this mode. Accommodating might take the form of selfless generosity or charity, obeying another person’s order when you would prefer not to, or yielding to another’s point of view.

Situations when accommodating may be an option are:

- When you realize that you are wrong—to allow a better solution to be considered, to learn from others, and to show that you are reasonable
- When the issue is much more important to the other person than it is to you—to satisfy the needs of others and as a goodwill gesture to help maintain a cooperative relationship
- When you want to build up social credits for later issues that are important to you
- When you are outmatched and losing and more competition would only damage your cause
- When preserving harmony and avoiding disruption are especially important
- When you want to help your employees develop by allowing them to experiment and learn from their mistakes

(3). Competing: (High assertiveness and low cooperation): ***“My way or the highway”***

It is assertive and uncooperative, a power-oriented mode. When competing, an individual pursues his or her own concerns at the other person’s expense, using whatever power seems appropriate to win his or her position. Competing may mean standing up for your rights, defending a position you believe is correct or simply trying to win.’

Situations when competing may be an option are:

- When quick, decisive action is vital—for example, in an emergency
- On important issues when unpopular courses of action need implementing—for example, cost cutting, enforcing unpopular rules, discipline
- On issues vital to company welfare when you know you’re right
- When you need to protect yourself from people who take advantage of noncompetitive behavior

(4).Compromising: (Medium assertiveness and medium cooperation): **“Let’s make a deal!”**

Compromising is intermediate in both assertiveness and cooperativeness. When compromising, an individual has the objective of finding an expedient, mutually acceptable solution that partially satisfies both parties. Compromising falls on a middle ground between competing and accommodating, giving up more than competing but less than accommodating. Likewise, it addresses an issue more directly than avoiding but doesn’t explore it in as much depth as collaborating. Compromising might mean splitting the difference, exchanging concessions, or seeking a quick middle-ground position.

Situations when compromising may be an option are:

- When goals are moderately important but not worth the effort or the potential disruption involved in using more assertive modes
- When two opponents with equal power are strongly committed to mutually exclusive goals - —as in labor–management bargaining
- When you want to achieve a temporary settlement of a complex issue
- When you need to arrive at an expedient solution under time pressure
- As a backup mode when collaboration or competition fails

(5). Collaborating: (High assertiveness and high cooperation): **“Two heads are better than one!”**

Collaboration is the best suggested way to **manage conflicts** in **Cross functional teams**. Collaborating is both assertive and cooperative. When collaborating, an individual attempts to work with the other person to find a solution that fully satisfies the concerns of both. It involves digging into an issue to identify the underlying concerns of the two individuals and to find an alternative that meets both sets of concerns. Collaborating between two persons might take the form of exploring a disagreement to learn from each other’s insights, resolving some condition that would otherwise have them competing for resources, or confronting and trying to find a creative solution to an interpersonal problem.

Situations when compromising may be an option are:

- When you need to find an integrative solution and the concerns of both parties are too important to be compromised
- When your objective is to learn and you wish to test your assumptions and understand others views
- When you want to merge insights from people with different perspectives on a problem
- When you want to gain commitment by incorporating others’ concerns into a consensual decision
- When you need to work through hard feelings that have been interfering with a relationship

REASON FOR CONFLICT IN GLOBAL VIRTUAL TEAMS

Four dimensions that characterize virtual teams are

- **Spatial dispersion:** This dimension is concerned with degree to which team members workplaces are dispersed.
- **Temporal dispersion :** This dimension is concerned with degree to which team members work at different times
- **Cultural dispersion:** This dimension is concerned with extent to which team members are constituted to various cultures.
- **Organizational dispersion:** This dimension is concerned with degree to which team members work between organizational boundaries.

SOURCES OF CONFLICT ASSOCIATED WITH FOUR VIRTUALITY DIMENSIONS	
VIRTUALITY DIMENSIONS	SOURCES OF CONFLICT
Spatial dispersion	Task, role, responsibility ambiguity Lack of trust
Temporal dispersion	Task, role, responsibility ambiguity Lack of trust
Cultural dispersion	Cultural differences Lack of trust
Organizational dispersion	Weak identity Low group cohesiveness Lack of trust

Figure2: Table shows depicts sources of conflict associated with each dimension

In spatially and temporally dispersed teams, members work without face-to-face interaction and direct supervision. In such an environment, it is difficult for team members to receive guidance or instruction on their tasks and roles from supervisors or peers. Moreover, they have fewer opportunities to clarify their tasks and roles than face-to-face team members. Therefore, virtual team members are more likely to experience task, role, and responsibility ambiguity. This ambiguity can be a source of conflict in virtual teams.

A Chinese supervisee in a virtual project team in a global pharmaceutical company recently had a conflict with his manager in New Jersey. The supervisee needed intensive training from the manager because he had been assigned a new task. Although he found his task quite ambiguous, he was reluctant to call the manager frequently and ask her to clarify the task, since he was afraid of interrupting her at night. E-mailing is an alternative method of communication, but he needed to wait half a day for the manager to respond to his e-mail, due to the time difference between China and the United States. Lack of task clarification caused him to misunderstand the task objectives, which, as a result, led him to produce outputs quite different from what the management had expected. The supervisee found this situation frustrating and felt that his manager was also responsible for the wrong outputs. He currently feels the necessity of discussing and resolving this issue with his manager.

Virtual teams are usually composed of people from diverse backgrounds and cultures who have rarely met or worked with one another before. Such cultural differences among virtual team members may cause conflict. People from different cultures vary in terms of their values, personality, and work and communication styles. For instance, people from individualistic cultures put a heavier emphasis on the need, values, and goals of the individual than those of the group. In collectivistic cultures, the needs, values, and goals of the group take precedence over those of the individual. It should be noted that cultural differences could also be a source of conflict in face-to-face teams. However, cultural differences are more critical in virtual teams than in face-to-face teams, since virtual teams usually consist of more diverse members than face-to-face. Another reason why cultural differences can be an important issue in virtual teams is that the absence of face-to-face interaction in virtual teams may make it more difficult for team members to resolve conflict or misunderstanding.

Indeed, cultural differences have caused a dispute between two members of a global virtual team in a high-tech company. A 43- year-old Korean engineer in the team has been working with a U.S. computer programmer who is 15 years younger than he. At first, their collaboration went smoothly, but the Korean engineer began to feel that the U.S. programmer had been rude to him. He was often offended by the U.S. programmer's e-mails, which directly expressed how she felt about collaboration with him – whether it was positive or negative. In particular, he found it unbearable that she pointed out problems or flaws in his work style and suggested how they could be fixed. This was incompatible with his cultural values, since Koreans are expected to respect elders and not to confront them directly.

The other dimension is organizational dispersion, which refers to the degree to which a virtual team consists of individuals who work across organizational boundaries. This multi-organizational nature of

virtual teams may cause identity issues. Compared to traditional teams, virtual teams have a more permeable boundary. Processes of virtual teams transcend the boundary of a single organization, and virtual teams incessantly band and disband according to a specific purpose, which often causes membership and relationship within a virtual team to be temporary and tenuous. Thus, virtual team members may experience conflict associated with identity issues that result from belonging to a team of people from different organizations. In addition, the temporary and multi-organizational nature of virtual teams may hinder the development of group cohesiveness. Group cohesiveness refers to members' attraction to the group and its task. Virtual teams have reported lower levels of cohesiveness than face-to-face teams. It is likely that lack of physical interactions and informal relationships decrease the cohesiveness of virtual teams. Hence, weak identity and low group cohesiveness can lead to conflict in virtual teams.

A consultant who used to work for a human resource development team in a large New York consulting firm was assigned to a virtual team that consisted of employees from two investment banks that would merge soon. The consultant's duty was to design a human resource development program for the merged bank. To perform this task, he needed to collaborate with employees of the two banks. As the collaboration went on, the consultant felt isolated, since the cultures of the two banks quite differed from that of the consulting firm. Because the consultant needed to spend most of his work hours interacting with bank employees, he felt disconnected from his previous team, which caused him to feel that he did not belong to any team. As a consequence, he is having a difficult relationship with others in the team and hoping that the project will be over as soon as possible.

The spatial, temporal, cultural, and organizational dispersion of virtual teams may altogether elicit trust issues, which are another possible source of conflict. The absence of traditional mechanisms of control (direct supervision) may prevent virtual team members from trusting one another. Since team members rarely see one another, lack of trust can be a critical source of conflict in virtual teams. If team members cannot trust one another, they are likely to be reluctant to share information and ideas and to collaborate, which, in turn, will lead to conflict among them. Furthermore, because virtual teams consist of individuals who possess diverse backgrounds and have rarely met or worked with one another before, they often do not possess knowledge of others' competencies and past performance. Thus, disbelief in others' competencies or performance may cause conflict in virtual teams.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION FOR GLOBAL VIRTUAL TEAMS

Workplace conflicts can be resolved using methods such as negotiation, mediation, facilitation, arbitration, and litigation. Among these various methods, negotiation and mediation are the most common. It is suggested that negotiation and mediation are preferred way to resolve conflict in virtual teams. While a growing number of e-commerce companies have utilized on-line dispute resolution to deal with conflict with their customers, there have been very few attempts to adopt conflict resolution systems specifically designed for virtual teams. A variety of electronic technologies such as e-mail, intranet, and on-line chat can be employed as means of conflict resolution in virtual settings, on-line chat is ideal for virtual workers in that it allows multiple parties (including the mediator) to communicate synchronously.

CONCLUSION

Conflicts arise anywhere in all types of teams due to human nature and at times these conflicts are very healthy and useful. It can be constructive or destructive. The outcome of conflict depends upon how we handle or resolve the conflict. They cannot be avoided but by understanding types of conflicts and our teams we can be better prepared to deal with it if it comes our way. In cross functional teams the best and most preferred way to get conflict resolved is collaboration. In global virtual teams we may resolve conflicts using methods such as negotiation, mediation, arbitration and litigation. But it's very important for virtual global teams to have understanding of cultural diversity and conflict resolution.

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