INTENTIONAL MOVES

How Skillful Team Leaders IMPACT LEARNING

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MANAGE CONFLICT

If you have read any other book on professional learning communities or teaming, you have likely heard that conflict is good and should not be avoided. Conflict indicates that you have a team of independent thinkers with diverse perspectives. But, a key point perhaps said best by triple Olympic crew medalist Bo Hanson is "Diversity always delivers better outcomes, but only if the team can manage the differences" (quoted in Haigh, n.d.). High-functioning, high-impact Q1 teams have learned how to manage the differences. They engage in productive conflict.

Conflict tends to fall into one of two categories: task-related or interpersonal. Task-related is most commonly caused by miscommunication, limited resources, or unclear roles and parameters. Interpersonal conflict typically stems from different ideologies, contrasting personalities and distinct work styles, generational gaps, competition, and personal grievances. Both types of conflict can be uncomfortable; neither should be left to fester. Skillful team leaders (STLs) employ various moves to manage conflict.

STL moves:

5.17 Clarify understanding.

5.18 Interrupt negative energy.

5.19 Turn to a third data point.

5.20 Listen for the point of agreement.

5.21 Acknowledge. Assert. Move on.

5.22 Adopt a learning stance.

5.23 Clear the air as a group.

5.24 Check in 1:1.

5.25 Provide a graceful exit.

Tools and templates:

Figure 20: Iceberg Visual as Told by Daryl Campbell

Figure 21: Clear the Air as a Group: Roles and Rules of Engagement

Figure 22: Speaker and Listener Writing Prompts

What these moves promote:

Communication. People have opportunities to work through miscommunication.

Respect. People learn how to disagree without personal attacks or gossip.

Harmony. Unproductive conflict is resolved so that people get along.

Morale. People work through tension and feel more positive about the team.

When to use these moves:

Most of these moves are intended to nip unproductive conflict before it escalates.

Related readings:

- Moves 2.1–2.10, "Establish expectations and responsibilities." Avoid task-related conflict with moves that set clear expectations and responsibilities.

- Moves 3.3–3.8, "Build community and relational trust through play." Implement these moves to nurture a culture of community and trust. When conflict erupts, your team will be better prepared to manage it.

- Move 8.15, "Clarify the decision-making process." Decision making can be a hot spot for conflict. When everyone has a shared understanding of how the group will make decisions, conflict is less likely to erupt about the process, and people can engage in healthy debate about the content of the decision.

5.17 Clarify understanding.

Have you ever gotten into a heated argument with someone only to realize after a couple of rounds that you actually wanted the same thing? Many conflicts arise simply because of miscommunication rather than actual differences of opinion. Tone, word choice, emotion, and assumptions can add to misunderstanding. Skillful team leaders (STLs) clarify their own and others' understanding to make sure everyone "gets" what each person is saying.

How to clarify understanding:

Before assuming that you know what your colleague is saying, structure your response in the following three ways:

1. Pinpoint what you need clarified. For example, instead of saying "I don't understand," say "I understand why you want us to do this, but I need to better understand your idea for what we should do to get there."

2. Prompt your colleague to give details or offer examples to help you better grasp what they are saying.

3. Confirm your understanding by paraphrasing and asking a closed question such as "I heard you say . . . Is this accurate?"

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STL recommendation:

Remain in a learning stance. This move is about checking that you are not misunderstanding the other person's position. You may also feel the need to clarify their understanding of what you are saying, but if you do, be careful to remain in a learning stance, not a proving stance, so that they can hear you (see Move 5.22).

Grab a third party. If the stakes are high—perhaps you've had conflict with this individual before and don't want to damage relations further—invite a colleague to the conversation and ask them to mediate.

Find the right words:

- *When you say . . . what do you mean?*

- *I'm unclear about . . . Can you talk further about that?*

- *I hear you saying . . . Are you objecting to . . . ?*

- *I don't understand the part about . . . Can you give me an example?*

Related reading:

Move 5.8, "Paraphrase." Turn to this move when confirming your understanding of what your colleague is saying.

5.18 Interrupt negative energy.

Call waiting is a godsend. I have a history of the occasional heated phone conversation with a close family member. We've gotten ourselves so worked up at times to the point where neither of us can hear what the other person is saying, and the conflict will go on endlessly until something unexpected happens. One of us gets another call. That brief period of being on hold while the person clicks over to the other call is enough for both of us to calm down and reset. When we pick up the conversation again, we are usually able to resume working things out in a more civilized way, agree to talk about it later, or just let the whole thing go. When a group conflict is heightened to an emotional state where people rant, fight, panic, or even cry, skillful team leaders (STLs) intentionally interrupt the flow of negative energy in the room so that the group can move on.

How to interrupt negative energy:

Consider the following:

- *Shift from talking to writing.* Invite people to respond to the circumstances in writing. The silence can break up the bickering.

- *Change the task.* When people are at an impasse, pause and redirect attention to another less controversial task on your agenda. It should be an easy win—something everyone can agree on and accomplish. This gets people

talking to one another again in a productive way. Then, return to discussing the controversial topic.

- *Get moving.* Invite people to continue the debate while walking. Change of scenery and physical movement can change the ways in which people engage.

- *Do a mindfulness activity.* Check in with how people are feeling in their bodies and try some breathing activities. (This approach can also really tick some people off, so only use it if you know your group will be receptive to it.)

- *Table the discussion* (see Move 5.9). Timing is everything. People may need to step away from the conflict before they can resolve it.

Find the right words:

- *Hold that thought for one moment. I just want to turn our attention to some housekeeping. . . . [A few minutes later] Thanks. OK. Let's revisit what we are talking about.*

- *I hear what you are saying. Let's take a moment to write down your thinking so everyone has an opportunity to weigh in on this. We'll finish our task and then have an opportunity to share out if you want.*

- *We've been discussing this while seated for a while. Let's continue the conversation as we walk to lunch.*

Related readings:

Move 8.7, "Reframe a negative association." When someone voices something negative about a person or group of people, change language to influence perceptions and the energy in the room.

Move 9.8, "Reframe talk about resistance." People often assign negative attributes to a person who shows reluctance to change. Insert different language that can get people to see the benefits of resistance.

5.19 Turn to a third data point.

In professional football, when a coach disagrees with a referee's call, they can request an instant replay. Viewing the recorded play, officials can quickly come to agreement about the accuracy of the call. When two or more parties engage in conflict on a school team, particularly if that conflict starts to devolve into personal attacks, skillful team leaders (STLs) can turn to a third data point (something other than the two people arguing in the room). This keeps the debate about ideas, not people. For example, instead of two people bickering over who is right, they turn to a shared text and say, "I disagree with your interpretation of the text."

Third data points might include a goal, a policy, assessment data or student work, or a passage from a text.

How to turn to a third data point:

Set expectations for how your team engages in disagreement. Pull back from personal attacks by redirecting the conversation to a third data point, something other than the two people talking in the room. Ask people to debate the evidence present in the third data point.

In action:

Kelsey leads a contentious individualized education program (IEP) meeting.

Parent: I keep telling you that whatever you are doing isn't working. My child is melting down every night when he does homework.

Teacher 1:   Well, I'm doing all I can on my end. I explain the homework. I do a sample with the students. Your child never asks questions or comes to me for help. And when I walk over to him to check in that he understands, he pushes me away.

Parent: So you're saying it's my son's fault?

Teacher 1:   No, not at all. But maybe we should look at the conditions you've set up at home for him to get his homework done. Does he have a quiet space to work?

Parent: This is not my fault. You're the school. This is your responsibility. It's like you don't care.

Kelsey: I'm going to interject for a moment and ask that we look at your son's most recent homework assignments that he wasn't able to complete. Maybe it will give us a better sense of how to help him, which is what we all want.

Think like a teacher:

You've likely been in a situation where two students are getting heated about what you are teaching, and you are trying to mediate, but the conflict is getting personal. There are many moves you make to de-escalate the tension, one of which is turning their attention back to the subject matter that began the debate. You might say, "Pause and let's go back into the text to see what the author is saying." Or, "If we look back at the language of the problem, then you'll see it is asking us to solve . . ."

Drawing your colleagues to an external data point can relieve conflict and help people find common ground.

STL recommendation:

Make a copy. Ensure everyone has a visual of the third data point for reference. Make copies or project it on a screen.

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Find the right words:

- *I appreciate what you are saying, but when I look at [data point], I notice . . .*

- *I hear you. Can you help me better understand your point of view by referring to [data point]?*

- *This is getting personal, and I want to ground our disagreement back to a [data point].*

5.20 Listen for the point of agreement.

Two people might have completely different perceptions of the same experience, creating conflict on the surface, but underlying that disagreement there may actually be a shared value that just hasn't been made visible, yet. To illustrate this, STL Daryl Campbell, influenced by his training and work with the Interaction Institute for Social Change, uses the iceberg visual in Figure 20: a drawing of two icebergs representing two distinct opinions that, when extended, intersect. Skillful team leaders (STLs) listen for the point of agreement.

FIGURE 20   Iceberg Visual as Told by Daryl Campbell
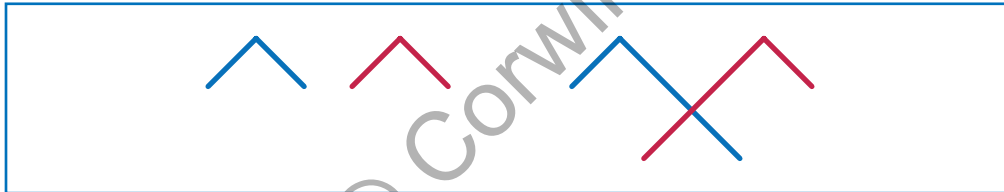
How to listen for the point of agreement:

Acknowledge that the two parties are engaged in a conflict. Validate each person's unique experience. Uncover the underlying beliefs, values, and assumptions beneath each person's opinion. Look for commonalities.

In action:

Teacher 1: I think we have a gossip and clique problem that needs to be addressed. Said or unsaid, there is an "in" crowd, and it creates division among our staff.

Teacher 2: I don't think this behavior is everywhere in our school. Teachers at my grade level are inclusive.

Teacher 1: C'mon. If we are being real here, you know people talk behind one another's backs on our staff.

Teacher 2: I don't think that's true. I'm direct with people.

Brendan: Thank you both. I'm going to interject here because it's important to note that people have had different experiences, and our purpose is not to debate to what extent those experiences are true; it's just to be aware of the hindering behaviors that might creep into our own team meetings, and set norms to avoid them. Where I see agreement between you is the recommendation for our team to be inclusive and direct.

Find the right words:

- (To both parties) *Let's look for the connection between your ideas.*

- *It sounds like you disagree on . . . but you both agree on . . .*

Related readings:

Move 8.16, "Reach agreement on group decisions." Find multiple strategies for reaching consensus with a group.

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