

Removing the paradox of conflict from group decisions

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Research Translation

It's a paradox. Good group decisions emerge from conflict when disagreement among team members leads to the identification and consideration of a variety of decision solutions. But conflict among team members also breeds dissatisfaction, ill feelings and reduced cooperation. Team leaders often realize that teams may need to simultaneously embrace conflict to improve decision quality and shun it to improve the chances for consensus and future implementation. Thus team leaders face a critical dilemma: how can they satisfy these two basic but often opposing conditions?

Allen Amason of Mississippi State University studied this paradox of conflict and has some suggestions for managers of decision-making teams. Amason says we need first to recognize that conflict has two faces. The first face, cognitive conflict, occurs with differences in perspectives and judgments. Since it helps identify potential problem solutions, cognitive conflict is readily accepted as good or functional. Affective conflict, on the other hand, is considered bad or dysfunctional because it tends to be emotional and is aimed at a person, not an issue. Such conflict typically comes through personal criticism and often destroys team cohesion.

Amason's study of the relationship between functional and dysfunctional conflict looked at 164 managers from 53 management teams in the food processing and furniture manufacturing industries. He found that cognitive and affective conflict occurred together but led to quite different decision outcomes. Cognitive conflict, such as open issue-related disagreement, was beneficial to a team's decision quality. Teams experiencing cognitive conflict made better decisions and had a better understanding of their final decision. Their understanding, in turn, led to better acceptance and ownership of the decision. Affective conflict led to poor decisions and low levels of acceptance of the decision.

Amason's study has strong implications for the management of decision-making teams. Like other studies, this study suggests that conflict can actually improve decision quality and reaffirms findings that better decisions are made when multiple perspectives are brought to bear on a problem. The lively, rigorous examination of issues that typically accompanies conflicts in perspective should lead to a better understanding of the relevant issues. Further, Amason's study also shows that cognitive conflict actually seems to enhance both the understanding of issues and the subsequent acceptance of decisions made by a group. However, his study also shows that it is only the cognitive dimension of conflict (that is, issue-related conflict) that accounts for the improvement. Affective conflict works in the opposite direction and erodes decision quality.

Therefore, Amason warns that conflict within teams is truly a two-edged sword; it can bring very positive or very negative processes into team discussions.

Further, he suggests that cognitive conflict, if misunderstood or misinterpreted, may turn into affective conflict. Consequently, he warns team leaders to recognize the difference between cognitive and affective conflict. Attempts to stimulate cognitive conflict may backfire and trigger affective conflict that may damage both the team and its decision quality. Team leaders must be alert for any shift from cognitive to affective conflict, counter the shift and steer the team back toward functional conflict. If unable to correct the negative spin, team leaders should consider ending a meeting rather than risking further damage to the team's spirit.

Source: Allen C. Amason, "Distinguishing the Effects of Functional and Dysfunctional Conflict on Strategic Decision Making: Resolving a Paradox for Top Management Teams," *Academy of Management Journal*, 39(1): 123-148.