

Project Conflicts



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Summary: Project managers can resolve some conflicts using one of the 5 techniques discussed below. But other conflicts can't be resolved and rather than give up, project managers should manage these feuds so they don't affect the project results.

Project managers need to be able to resolve some conflicts and leave others to fester but control them to minimize damage. Let's consider some actual situations:

Two engineers have had a three day long debate over which of their technical solutions should be used in the project. Very few people on the project team actually understand the differences between the two approaches. But the conflict is wasting peoples' time in status meetings and may soon delay a number of dependent tasks in the project. Both of the combatants have separately and privately apologized to the other team members blaming the other combatant.

A project team member from marketing and a team member from operations are engaged in a nasty dispute about the costs of features of a new product the project will deliver. These two departments have a long history of conflict, which is not unusual given the different perspectives of each functional area. The project manager is aware that each of the combatants is being encouraged by their "home department" managers who don't want their representative to lose.

A project manager looking at these two conflict situations should decide that the first conflict can be resolved with relative ease while the second conflict may defy resolution. Let's talk about the easy one first and the five techniques we might use to resolve it.

Techniques for Conflicts that Can be Resolved

There are five standard techniques for approaching conflict situations. Not all of these are equally effective.

Accommodation – The project manager persuades one party to the conflict to sacrifice their needs and wishes to accommodate the other party. The project manager may appeal to one person's team spirit, or concern about the larger needs of the project. This technique has the unfortunate side effect of leaving a lingering resentment which can cause the conflict to flare up with the party that made the sacrifice deciding it's now the other person's turn to lose.

Avoidance – A project manager can avoid or postpone conflict by ignoring it, changing the subject, or taking everybody to lunch and talking about something else. Avoidance can be useful as a temporary measure to buy time until the project work is finished or as an expedient means of dealing with very minor, non-recurring conflicts.

Problem solving – The project manager works with the parties in conflict to find a mutually beneficial solution, a win-win solution to the conflict. This approach can be time-intensive and inappropriate when there is not enough trust, respect or communication among participants for collaboration to occur.

Compromise – The project manager brings the problem out into the open and acts as an arbitrator to fashion a settlement which most often means both parties lose a little.

Competition – The project manager gives each party an opportunity to present their position and then the PM decides who wins.

These five techniques are useful in resolving many conflicts but there are some conflicts, like the second one above, for which none of our five techniques are likely to succeed. In this case the project manager doesn't give up but simply uses a bit more sophisticated tool to try and manage the conflict and minimize the damage.

I Can't Resolve it so I Manage it

In these more complex situations, a project manager needs to assess the relative strengths of the two positions before paying any attention to the details of the conflict itself. We assess the strengths of the parties' positions in terms of the options they each have if the conflict is not resolved. In situation #2 with the feuding operations and marketing people, they each can go back to their departments as a hero if the conflict is not resolved.

The project manager's approach to managing the conflict starts from understanding that a negotiated solution is less attractive than continuing the conflict. The project manager does not continue to try the resolution techniques above. Instead the project manager will over time try to make a negotiated solution more attractive than continuing the conflict. In our example of operations and marketing, the project manager might try to alter the situation so that each of the people in the conflict will be blamed for the project failure if the conflict persists. Then a solution becomes more attractive.

The fancy name for this is BATNA, which is an acronym for "Best Alternative To a Negotiated Agreement." With it, we assess the options available to each party if we can't negotiate a solution. To learn these techniques and practice them in live simulations with your instructor, consider our [individual project management instruction](#).