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## 12. Strategies for developing trust through constructive conflict resolution in teams

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Trust dies but mistrust blossoms.  
Sophocles

Experiencing conflict and the potential for developing mistrust are facts of life for any team. Whether that team is a card club of friends or the top management team of a major corporation, the potential for conflict and a lack of trust is ever present. One of the key challenges for any team is how to manage conflict in a way that brings out the potential benefits of conflict (e.g., more thorough processing of information and divergent thinking) without the pitfalls (e.g., distraction from key tasks and negative affect) (see Jehn and Bendersky, 2003 for a review). To achieve this goal, research suggests that trust is an essential ingredient. A large and growing body of literature suggests that conflict in the presence of trust can be beneficial, and conflict in the absence of trust is almost universally bad for teams (Simons and Peterson, 2000). This does beg the question, however, about how teams can encourage trust. As hard as one might wish team members to trust one another, trust is not a psychological state that can be either imposed or guaranteed within any team.

This chapter focuses on this issue by suggesting ways in which teams and/or team leaders can encourage trust amongst team members through constructive conflict management. First, we review research on conflict and team performance and examine the crucial role of trust in this process. We then suggest three junctures in the life of a group where trust and constructive conflict can be encouraged. We discuss key opportunities and risks for developing intragroup trust at each juncture in the life of a team.

### CONFLICT AND TEAM PERFORMANCE

The majority of research on conflict in teams paints a negative picture of the role conflict plays in team performance (for reviews see: De Dreu and Weingart, 2003; De Wit et al., 2012; Jehn and Bendersky, 2003). Indeed, there is a long history of negative findings in the groups and teams literature documenting that intragroup conflict leads to outcomes such as negative affect and hurt feelings, poor information handling, and sub-optimal decision-making (Brown, 1983; Gladstein, 1984; Jehn, 1995). It is hardly a surprise that many people simply wish to avoid conflict in teams altogether. We will argue in this chapter that the avoidant strategy is neither realistic nor helpful for groups for two interrelated reasons. First, because any attempt to smother conflict will likely drive conflict underground where it can do unseen harm. And second, because ignoring conflict denies the group the opportunity to build on the ideas and information of its members

to improve group performance. We note that notwithstanding all of the negative findings about the effect of conflict on team performance in the literature, there has been a steady stream of scholars arguing and finding evidence that conflict, in the right conditions, can have positive outcomes for groups if it comes in the presence of trust.

Research that highlights the positive effects of conflict suggests, for example, that the experience of conflict can make people more creative and open-minded in their thinking (Nemeth, 1986), more committed to group decisions (e.g., Amason, 1996; Peterson, 1999; Thibaut and Walker, 1975), more knowledgeable about one another and their interests (see Ronson and Peterson, 2007 for a review), and more thorough in their cognitive understanding of issues leading to better group decision-making (Baron, 1991; Fiol, 1994; Janssen et al., 1999; Putnam, 1994; Schweiger et al., 1986; Tjosvold, 1991); moreover, conflict improves team performance in complex situations (De Wit et al., 2012; Jehn, 1995). Realizing these outcomes, however, requires that the conflict be carefully managed.

The benefits of conflict in group decision-making can easily be overwhelmed by the problems that conflict creates when task debates lead to relationship conflict, a lack of cohesion, and low levels of intragroup trust. The experience of conflict generally feels uncomfortable for individual group members, even when there are information-sharing benefits. When people disagree over substantive issues related to their work, for example, it can easily transform into negative interpersonal relationships because group members may make comments or take actions that can easily be misattributed as a personal attack (Simons and Peterson, 2000). It is easy to feel irritated when someone disagrees with you, or to take a heated debate about one of your ideas personally. When others' statements or actions are misinterpreted in this way, they are also more likely to reciprocate with mistrust (Zand, 1972). Conflict in the absence of trust is likely to leave group members feeling suspicious of one another's motives – or worse, actively mistrusting each other.

## THE ROLE OF TRUST IN CONFLICT

We define trust as the belief that others will act in a way that works towards one's best interests when they have the opportunity to do so (i.e., benevolence; see Mayer et al., 1995; Zand, 1972). The essence of trust, therefore, is an expression of confidence that others have positive motives towards you (Mellinger, 1956), and that others will act cooperatively. Scholars have long suggested that trust is the basis for cooperation (e.g., Blau, 1964), and the underpinning of successful interpersonal relationships (Rempel et al., 1985). Trust in small groups is built when members are willing to be vulnerable to one another based on their confidence in each other's benevolence (Rousseau et al., 1998) and they demonstrate this willingness through their words and actions. Zand (1972), for example, suggests that trust is reinforced over time through patterns of information sharing, influence, and control. When group members freely share information versus hoarding information and other resources, they reveal their confidence that they will not be taken advantage of by others in the group. Trust is thus an essential ingredient in effective conflict resolution that results in better decisions and superior performance in groups (Behfar et al., 2008).

More deeply, however, we argue that not only can conflict have positive outcomes in

Table 12.1 *Junctures of opportunities to build trust through constructive conflict in teams*

Juncture 1: Team and task structuring	Juncture 2: Group communication	Juncture 3: Assessing outputs
Consider diversity (such as, personality configurations; subgroups)	Promote inclusive group discussion	Manage external feedback as a group
Provide task interdependence and goal alignment	Use consensus decision rules	Reflect on past group decisions
Ensure both information diversity and overlap	Span boundaries as a group	Avoid individual blame assignment
Create conditions for effective information sharing (e.g., identify group member expertise; prompt search for 'correct' answers; encourage documentation of information)		

groups in the presence of trust, but also that conflict is actually necessary for the development of cooperation in groups. In the absence of conflict, it is difficult for group members to uncover and come to understand one another's perspectives, motivations, and goals, and use these unique perspectives and information in service of the group. In short, conflict provides an opportunity for members to: (1) gain knowledge about the issues being debated; (2) learn about one another; (3) demonstrate their trust of each other; and (4) display their own trustworthiness as a group member. Thus, although conflict can lead to the erosion of trust in groups, it is also the foundation of trust building in groups (Ronson and Peterson, 2007). Our chapter starts from this core premise and focuses on the opportunities groups have to engage in constructive conflict and develop intragroup trust amongst members (and de facto improve performance) while minimizing destructive relationship conflict. We identify three key junctures at which groups can achieve this (see Table 12.1).

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR ENCOURAGING CONSTRUCTIVE CONFLICT AND TRUST

### **Juncture 1: Inputs – Team and Task Structuring**

Teams are constructed for all kinds of reasons – from having representatives of departments within an organization, to collecting the experts needed for a specific project, or based on historical custom or tradition. However, teams are rarely built with their future dynamics in mind. Groups could be composed, for example, to foster trust, maximize

useful aspects of task conflict, and minimize relationship conflict. In particular, consideration of the individual differences group members bring to the team can clarify, in part, the likelihood of developing trust early on within the team.

Personality characteristics of the group's members can combine in different ways to foster opportunities to build trust. For example, people high in agreeableness are trusting, sympathetic, and cooperative (Costa and McCrae, 1992), and research has shown that groups composed of people high in agreeableness have smooth interpersonal relationships (Neuman and Wright, 1999) and may be more effective at teamwork because of these inherent propensities to trust and cooperate with each other (Driskell et al., 2006). Thus groups composed of members high in agreeableness may be more likely to engage in behaviors that demonstrate trust and trustworthiness than groups composed of members low in agreeableness.

At the same time, groups composed of members high in agreeableness may strive to avoid any kind of conflict, even that which is constructive. Therefore, team leaders should take care to encourage some degree of task conflict in teams composed of highly agreeable people by making it easy to disagree with one another's ideas and opinions about the group task, in order to take advantage of their unique knowledge and skills. For example, teams composed exclusively of highly agreeable members can establish norms that encourage task-related debates and divergent thinking as project elements that are not only acceptable but also expected (e.g., a norm of exploring all reservations no matter how small, adopting a 'consider the opposite' approach to evaluating ideas, and so on). Adopting such norms allows group members to freely share information, which encourages trust (Zand, 1972), without limiting discussion to non-controversial ideas.

A second personality characteristic that could influence the development of trust through conflict is extraversion. People high in extraversion are assertive, energetic, sociable, and dominant (Costa and McCrae, 1992). Research has shown that groups composed of members that differ in extraversion are more cohesive (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005) and have better task performance (Neuman et al., 1999) than groups composed of members who are uniform with respect to extraversion, perhaps because differences in extraversion reduce conflict over roles in the team. For example, groups in which most members are high in extraversion may have 'too many cooks in the kitchen,' resulting in process conflicts over who should do what (compare with logistical conflict; see Behfar et al., 2011) rather than constructive debates about ideas related to the task itself. Indeed, power struggles over who leads the team or who has the most say in team discussions may inspire people to erect barriers and resist others' attempts to take control or influence them. Ultimately, such actions display a lack of willingness to be vulnerable and may begin a cycle of mistrust in a team (Zand, 1972). As such, minimizing similarity on extraversion could help focus conflict to task discussion rather than social roles, effectively providing opportunities to build trust rather than destroy it.

Of course, planning a team around a particular dynamic is oftentimes not possible, and sometimes not advisable. Therefore, understanding of how the diversity of team members could affect trust and conflict should be taken into consideration when managing a group. Diversity, whether in the form of observable demographic characteristics like ethnicity or deep-level characteristics like functional experience or values, can benefit groups by bringing a range of unique perspectives to bear on group tasks.

However, diversity is also likely to feel uncomfortable to group members (e.g., Phillips, 2003) and delay the development of intragroup trust.

One strategy for accelerating the development of trust without sacrificing diversity's potential benefits may be to provide individual group members with both similar and dissimilar others in the group. Subgroups of similar others within an overall group provides individuals a cohort within which to find support for their perspectives while fostering the exchange of unique information between subgroups (see Gibson and Vermeulen, 2003). For example, including two women instead of just one in a group of men can provide gender diversity to offer unique perspectives in the group while at the same time also provide the minority members with a subgroup through which they can find support and confidence in voicing their ideas. Research shows that increasing the proportion of people who hold a minority view within a group also increases the likelihood that view will be shared (Asch, 1951), which could be key to giving diverse groups the opportunity to build trust by sharing and listening to one another's opinions. However, the presence of strong subgroups that split the group along faultlines that are activated by the task the group performs (e.g., two black females and two white males working on an affirmative action policy) could frustrate the process of building trust and engaging in constructive conflict (Thatcher and Patel, 2012). Thus groups should ensure that where strong dividing lines such as these exist, that they also use superordinate goals so that potential negatives of subgroups (e.g., fragmentation of overall group identity) do not outweigh the positives (such as cohorts and information sharing) (Carton and Cummings, 2012). In short, using subgroups that provide cohorts but do not substantially divide the group to manage diversity may speed the development of intragroup trust through task conflict while minimizing the chances that individuals will take such conflict personally (e.g., because they are no longer token members of the group).

Beyond considering the way in which team members are composed, a team leader can structure a team to promote trust in how the task itself is created. The task can be designed to create interdependence between group members, such that when one team member achieves her goals, all team members achieve their goals (Deutsch, 1949). Interdependence is a necessary condition for building trust (Rousseau et al., 1998), but it can also invite conflict (Kelley and Thibaut, 1978). The key here is to provide the opportunity for members to develop trust by relying on one another while minimizing the opportunity for harmful conflict to arise from differences in underlying interests. For instance, interdependence can be created either by: (1) dividing the work in such a way that group members must rely on one another to accomplish the task, or alternatively (2) structuring the reward that members receive for their part of the task to be dependent on the performance of the group as a whole (Johnson and Johnson, 1989; Wageman, 1995). At the same time, leaders should take care that the goals of individual members are aligned such that group members are not dis-incentivized to work collaboratively. Thus what is good for one member of the group benefits other members of the group, so that conflict over underlying differences in goals is minimized.

Structural solutions can also facilitate potentially constructive task conflict and opportunities to build trust in groups. In order to have task conflict, group members must first have different resources and information to draw upon, and they must then use their unique informational resources to inform the group's decisions. Groups that are high in information diversity have been found to have higher levels of performance (Jehn et al.,

1999). The first structural solution in promoting task conflict then, is to divide the task in such a way as to ensure that group members have unique perspectives rather than redundancies that discourage critical inquiry (Aronson, 1978; Johnson and Johnson, 1989). However, there must still be sufficient overlap in the knowledge of the group so that group members can understand and use one another's information (see Cronin and Weingart, 2007). Bunderson and Sutcliffe (2002) found that groups in which members are highly specialized in different functional silos tend to exchange less information because members do not believe that others can understand their information and fail to see how their information will be useful to others. In contrast, groups that are high in functional diversity but where group members are generalists with experience across a range of functions share more information and have higher levels of performance.

Once group members have a diverse informational source from which to draw, members must share their uniquely held information and use it to inform group decisions. Groups are not generally good at sharing and integrating their information, however (Stasser and Titus, 1985). But here again, the structure of the group can facilitate the sharing of information and the development of trust. One structural solution is to make clear to members of the group how information is held within the group – when group members are familiar with one another (Gruenfeld et al., 1996), or when they are told who holds what expertise in the group (Stewart and Stasser, 1995) they tend to be more effective at sharing information. Another structural intervention is to manipulate how group members perceive the task itself – when group members believe that a correct answer exists, they are more likely to search for that answer and therefore, to share more information (Stasser and Stewart, 1992). Also, when group members are told to focus on a different aspect of the task they are more likely to uncover unshared information; for example, Brodbeck et al. (2003) found that when group members with different information were told to focus on documenting information, they were more likely to uncover their uniquely held facts. Thus, by altering the goals or the subgoals of the task, the group is more likely to effectively share information, identify 'correct' answers, and receive positive feedback that promotes the development of trust.

### **Juncture 2: Process – Group Communication**

Oftentimes teams are established by outside sources and the task is created in a way that goals are not fully interdependent or aligned. Here the risk is that differing values and interests will result in the team fracturing along conceptual lines (Cronin and Weingart, 2007). This can be prevented by creating an inclusive group process that involves all members in decision-making. In particular, groups should encourage members to discuss all possible alternatives, to listen carefully to others, and respect the concerns and feelings of group members. Peterson (1997), for example, found that leaders who are process directive with an inclusive style are associated with a variety of positive outcomes in groups, including greater levels of intragroup trust and better quality decision-making. Such an open-minded approach is likely to facilitate the emergence of task conflict in such a way that the group can integrate differing points of view and share information, ultimately benefitting from conflict.

Relatedly, establishing inclusive process not only helps bring different points of view into the open but also gives group members voice in the decision-making process. Voice

has been shown to increase perceptions of fairness in decision-making and goal setting (e.g., Lind et al., 1990), and such perceptions are positively related to developing perceptions of trust (Colquitt et al., 2001). Additional procedures that encourage voice in group discussions could include taking turns to express opinions and having group members write down their thoughts and then pool their ideas. Procedures like these and others (e.g., open-door policies and idea drop boxes) ensure perceptions of fairness in group communication that could provide a foundation for both trust and constructive conflict through the sharing of unique ideas.

In some situations, however, it may be impossible to diffuse all differences in interests and values with inclusive and fair group processes. Individuals in organizations have a variety of motivations that may transcend their interests as they relate to a particular group. For example, a member of a task force who represents one division of a company may feel a greater commitment to represent that division than the task force itself, and the group may have little control over this broader set of motivations. In these situations, decision-making rules can help bridge the gap.

In particular, a consensus decision rule encourages group members to discuss their opinions, defend their ideas, and voice their concerns, because with a consensus decision rule each group member has the opportunity to veto any potential group decision (Peterson et al., 2004). This sort of open discussion exposes each group member to their differences and enables them to see things from one another's perspective, potentially finding points of shared concern. Consensus decision rules have consistently been associated with group satisfaction (e.g., Miller, 1989; Rawlins, 1984) and, more recently, with decision commitment and implementation success (Dooley et al., 2000). When group members must come to consensus, they are more likely to recognize different preferences and underlying reasons for those preferences, and, in order to make a decision, they resolve or compromise on those differences (Holloman and Hendrick, 1972; Mohammed and Ringseis, 2001). In this way, consensus decision-making may help to bring group member interests into alignment, fostering cooperation and trust and thus improve the quality of group outcomes.

In addition to considering the ways in which groups communicate internally, there are still opportunities to encourage the development of trust in how the group manages its external communication. External communication has been shown to have a direct effect on group performance (e.g., Ancona, 1990; Ancona and Caldwell, 1992a) because the external environment is a source of information that can and often should inform group decisions. For example, communicating with external stakeholders could potentially generate constructive task conflict because group members are exposed to and may need to reconcile competing perspectives pertaining to their task (Ancona and Caldwell, 1988). Indeed, a common way to facilitate external interaction is to compose the group of members from a range of functional specialties, so that they can interact and exchange knowledge with many groups outside of the team itself (Ancona and Caldwell, 1992b; Cummings, 2004). This can introduce problems because individual group members who are responsible for bringing outside perspectives back to the group are often mistrusted (Adams, 1976; Gruenfeld et al., 2000). More recent work by Ferguson (2012) suggests, however, that teams that seek external information in ways that keep the team together (such as bringing outside experts into a group meeting) are more likely to build shared team identity and perhaps encourage intragroup trust. Thus, options that keep teams

together rather than separating or fragmenting group members as they seek information from the external environment are more likely to develop a strong group identity, and we expect, build intragroup trust.

### **Juncture 3: Output – Assessing Outputs**

A final juncture in which teams have the opportunity to build trust is when outputs are assessed. For example, upon completion of task-related goals most groups receive performance feedback that can provoke responses related to conflict and trust. Peterson and Behfar (2003) demonstrated that relationship conflict is a reaction to, as well as a cause of, feedback about group performance. When groups receive initial negative feedback about their performance, their levels of both task and relationship conflict tend to increase. The increase in task conflict is an opportunity, but the increase in relationship conflict after performance feedback – particularly after negative feedback – is dangerous. Negative feedback reduces group efficacy and threatens group cohesion (Staw et al., 1981), and increases interpersonal tension (Peterson and Behfar, 2003).

One mechanism that may help group members react to negative feedback productively is to ensure that they receive feedback about their outputs as a group instead of individually. Van der Vegt et al. (2010), for example, investigated the influence of performance feedback on the relationship between power asymmetries and the collective orientation of team members. They found that group (versus individual) feedback helped groups with power differences better learn from performance feedback, arguing that this method of feedback better aligned members' goals. At times, however, group performance feedback may explicitly or implicitly relate to specific individuals on the team. Rather than using such feedback to blame individuals, however, integrating it with the overall goals of the team may in fact help the team better understand how to coordinate their efforts in the future. Swaab and Behfar (2013) showed that teams perform better when they integrate peer-specific feedback with superordinate team goals because this enables team members to more explicitly specialize their roles and better coordinate their expertise.

Finally, managing feedback as a group also provides members with an opportunity to reflect on past decisions and processes. Indeed, reflection is perhaps most helpful in transition phases of the group, during which one project has been completed and another is yet to begin (Marks et al., 2001). These phases give group members psychological distance from their task such that they can more impartially reflect on things that went well and things that could be improved in future projects. Key to this process is discussing successes and areas of development with a collective orientation – specifically, without blaming individual group members for failures. Here, the benefits of adopting consensus decision rules early on extend beyond the project itself to the evaluation of the project. Ultimately, consensus decision-making encourages taking collective responsibility for past actions upon reflection. As such, dispassionate reflection on previous tasks that have been based on consensus decision rules is yet another opportunity for groups to build trust through constructive debates instead of personal arguments.

## CONCLUSION

Conflict is a natural and frequent part of group life. Actively avoiding it can sometimes delay the pain of dealing with it, but it is unrealistic to expect that conflict can be wholly avoided. On the contrary, we argue in this chapter that conflict needs to be engaged, carefully. The experience of successful conflict resolution is likely to lead to a building of trust, which in turn encourages group members to learn about the issues in more detail, be more creative in problem solving, and be more committed to group decisions by being less defensive and more open to alternative points of view. This, we believe, should result in more effective and successful teams. We suggest strategies for encouraging intragroup trust through conflict management at three specific junctures in the life of a group: (1) input: team and task structuring – by considering the way individual differences combine to affect group conflict behaviors and by structuring interdependence with goal alignment into the task; (2) process: in managing the processes during team discussion – by ensuring inclusive group process, by using consensus where possible, and by encouraging group members to manage external boundaries as a group rather than a collection of individual relationships; and (3) outcome: in assessing group outputs – by collectively handling external feedback and reflecting on group work rather than solely individual contributions. We offer these three strategies for encouraging trust in groups in the belief that they will help teams achieve greater intragroup trust and thus enable teams to realize some benefit in addition to the disadvantages typically associated with intragroup conflict.

This chapter offers several theoretical and practical insights on the development of trust focused on encouraging constructive conflict in teams. We take two key interrelated positions that we believe have important implications. The first is that conflict can not only be beneficial for teams, but also that it is necessary to promote trust. Trust is built when members are willing to be vulnerable to one another and demonstrate this through words and actions (Mayer et al., 1995; Rousseau et al., 1998; Zand, 1972). Conflict provides this opportunity. Sharing information and debating ideas helps members get to know each other, demonstrate their trustworthiness, and reveal their benevolence when others display vulnerability. Second, the relationship between conflict and trust is reinforcing – constructive conflict that promotes trust leads to better information sharing and strengthened trust. Therefore, creating and/or understanding the conditions under which teams have opportunities to build trust through constructive conflict can facilitate these processes. This chapter outlines three such junctures: (1) at the time inputs are considered in team and task structuring, (2) during group process and discussion, and (3) when teams assess their outputs.

We believe our key points have a number of important implications for managers. First and foremost is our advice not to ignore conflict, but rather to engage it with care – inclusive discussions that try to resolve individual member differences and identify best practice are likely to build trust in teams. Or, for example, where teams have a need to receive perspectives from outside of the group, consider whether it is possible to bring that information into the group rather than having individual group members explore and return individually to the team. Team leaders also need to create the conditions for effective information sharing by, for example, identifying member experts and creating norms of evidence-based discussions. In assessing team outcomes, we would advise

managers to have a team discussion, debating group processes and outcomes. The team discussions should, however, stick to group lessons and avoid assignment of individual blame.

This chapter will not, of course, be the final word on the relationship between intra-group trust and conflict in teams. We hope this chapter inspires scholars to continue to explore other mechanisms by which these two important constructs interrelate. Specifically, we believe that the processes outlined here are likely to have boundary conditions such as overlap in interests and/or values. Where it is not possible to create a superordinate team goal, for example, it would seem well-nigh impossible to gain effective cooperation and build acceptable team-level solutions. Or perhaps there might be mechanisms for achieving trust through conflict that have not been fully explored. There is a rich history of work on constructive conflict resolution and trust building (e.g., work on GRIT – graduated and reciprocated initiatives in tension-reduction; Osgood, 1962), and we believe it is time for the field to return to some of these classic topics for a fresh look.

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