How to Reap the Benefits of Relationship Conflict
In Management Teams

Abstract

The rise of cross-functional teams as a way of managing complexity and promoting organizational learning and change has fueled an enduring interest in conflict management in teams. At the heart of this research is the assumption that managers ought to handle the inevitable conflicts that arise by focusing on task conflict and steering clear of relationship conflict. Yet as Edmondson and Smith (2006) show, these two types of conflict are more difficult to separate in practice than prior research suggests. This difficulty raises two questions. First, what are the mechanisms that give rise to relationship conflict? Second, is it possible to transform those mechanisms, thereby reducing incidences of relationship conflict and using that which remains to improve performance? I answer these questions as an action scientist, in the tradition of Chris Argyris. This paper presents multi-year research on two management teams that uncovers the cognitive processes that convert task conflict into relationship conflict. Further, I suggest that managers can transform these cognitive processes, allowing teams to stay focused on tasks and to use relationship conflict that occurs to improve performance and to strengthen relationships.

Key Words: Action Research, Action Science, Intervention, Organizational Learning, Organizational Change, Conflict in Management Teams

Introduction

Almost a hundred years ago management scholar Mary Parker Follet suggested: "As conflict—difference—is here in the world, as we cannot avoid it, we should, I think, use it. Instead of condemning it, we should set it to work for us (Follett, 1925/1951)." Although more important than ever in today's organizations, this advice remains easier said than done. Indeed, the very things that conflict offers management teams—learning from diverse views, quicker adaptation, help in managing uncertainty and complexity—it jeopardizes. All too often, conflict ends up dividing teams into camps, slowing down adaptation, reducing complexity to simplistic arguments, and shutting down the exploration of critical uncertainties.

To resolve this dilemma, current research on conflict in teams distinguishes between two types of conflict: task (or cognitive) conflict and relationship (or emotional) conflict. According to this research, while task conflict involves differences in views, ideas, and opinions over objective facts, relationship conflict involves disagreements over subjective matters such as political norms and values, personal taste, and interpersonal incompatibility. While task conflict is cognitive, relationship conflict is emotional, triggering tension, annoyance, or animosity among group members. Thus, while task conflict is functional and associated with good performance, relationship conflict is dysfunctional and associated with poor performance. The advice logically follows: focus on task conflict; avoid relationship conflict (Amason, 1996; Jehn, 1995, 1997; Eisenhardt, Kahwajy, Bourgeois, 1997; De Dreu and Van Vianen, 2001).

Research Focus and Methodology. As an action scientist, steeped in observational data collected while intervening over time, I was not surprised by these findings. I had often observed teams founder when substantive conflicts devolved into relationship conflicts. But as Edmondson and Smith (2006) show, under some conditions, teams are unable to avoid relationship conflict

despite their best efforts.[1] This finding raises two questions. First, what are the mechanisms that turn task conflict into relationship conflict? And second, is it possible for managers to transform those mechanisms in ways that reduce relationship conflict or turn it into a positive force?

To answer these questions, this paper draws on conclusions from cognitive research and transcript data from multi-year interventions in the top teams of two firms: Elite Systems, a highly regarded manufacturing firm that sells award-winning products to businesses, and Merrimac Group, a fast-growing, global professional services firm.[2] By taking an action science approach to my study of both teams, I was able to uncover: (1) the cognitive mechanisms that turn task conflict into relationship conflict, and (2) how managers can transform these mechanisms, and by doing so, strengthen their relationships and improve team performance.

Action science is a methodology through which researchers seek to study two aspects of social systems that remain largely hidden in everyday life: their unrealized potential, and the defenses that keep people from realizing that potential.[3] As articulated by Argyris, Putnam, and Smith (1985), action science is based on the premise that we cannot fully understand a social system until we seek to fundamentally change it. This is because fundamental change activates defense mechanisms, creating opportunities to study and transform them. Action scientists are

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[1] Van der Vegt and Bunderson (2005) found that survey measures of task and relationship conflict had a correlation of almost .90 in their study of project teams, leading them to create a single measure, "conflict."

[2] The names of these two firms have been disguised.

[3] Robert Putnam (forthcoming 2008) traces the history and methods of action science: "The term 'action science' was first used by Torbert (1976), who envisioned 'a science useful to an actor at the moment of action.' Torbert and associates have pursued this vision through what he now calls developmental action inquiry (2004). Argyris (1980) provided a critique of normal behavioral science and outlined an action science that would produce knowledge that can be implemented and would contribute to building alternatives to the status quo. He pointed to the action research of Kurt Lewin as an early model. Schön (1983) suggested that an action science 'would aim at the development of themes from which practitioners … can build and test their own on-the-spot theories of action.' Argyris, Putnam, and Smith (1985) placed action science in the context of the philosophy of science, compared it to examples of normal social science, and offered research on how people develop skill to conduct action science."

interested in building theory that explains our social world more completely, so practitioners can operate in it more effectively.

How Task Conflict Turns into Relationship Conflict

Consistent with most survey research, Eisenhardt, Kahwajy, and Bourgeois (1997) observational studies conclude that it is critical for teams: "to keep constructive conflict over issues from degenerating into dysfunctional interpersonal conflict." But because their research is based on observations, they are able to go a step further than survey research to observe that those teams that perform best did the following six things:[4]

- worked with more, rather than less information, and debated on the basis of facts;

- developed multiple alternatives to enrich the level of debate;

- shared commonly agreed-upon goals;

- injected humor into the decision process;

- maintained a balanced power structure;

- resolved issues without forcing consensus.

More recently, Edmondson and Smith (2006) have shown that teams are able to do these things—and thus avoid relationship conflict—when they are debating "cool" topics where: (1) facts are relatively easily accessible and sufficient to test competing views, (2) key uncertainties can be reduced, (3) stakes are low to moderate, and (4) goals are largely shared. Teams rarely, if ever, do these things, however, when debating "hot" topics where: (1) data are inaccessible or in dispute, (2) key uncertainties cannot be reduced, (3) stakes are high, and (4) divergent goals— fueled by competing beliefs, values, or interests—overshadow shared goals (see Table 1).

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[4] Eisenhardt, Kahwajy and Bourgeois (1997), p. 2.

Insert TABLE 1 Here

When faced with hot topics, even teams with facts at hand find it hard to resolve issues, triggering intense frustration. As the case below suggests, this frustration is fueled by—and fuels—well-known cognitive processes that make relationship conflict unavoidable.

The Elite Case. When the top team at Elite Systems discussed cool topics, they did fine: they focused on substantive topics; they relied on data to resolve their differences and to reach consensus; and they made joint decisions about what to do without over-relying on the CEO. But when topics heated up, they quickly ran into trouble, as illustrated below when Elite's top team met to discuss the firm's deteriorating financial performance.

Among the eight team members at that meeting were two executives: Ian McAlister, the head of Elite's struggling core business, and Frank Adams, president of the firm's smaller and fast-growing subsidiary offering less expensive product lines. Within minutes, these two executives turned the group's substantive discussion of the firm's performance into a dysfunctional relationship conflict. That discussion, excerpted below, begins with Frank citing current market research and ends with his questioning Ian's motives:[5]

Frank: When we did that study that broke the market down into the high, mid, and low segments, one of the most interesting things we did was look at each segment's growth potential. And the estimated growth of the high end (Ian's segment) was 0 to 2 percent, the middle was around 10 percent, and the bottom (Frank's segment) was projected around 15 percent plus. And so the growth is very much at the low end, and as somebody mentioned earlier, our subsidiary had a tremendous year.

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[5] For more on Elite, see Smith (2002).

I think this reflects a general dynamic in the market. The customers' desires are changing, and so the opportunities for us to serve them are changing, and all of it's moving down market (goes on to explain how technology might be used to exploit new opportunities, as his business is already doing). These advances in technology point to some very interesting opportunities, especially in the growth segments, as opposed to the ones that are already saturated, where competition is established and you're in a slug feast. It's just very difficult to maintain any kind of competitive advantage there for very long.

Ian: With the same information, I would go in a very different direction . . . . I know can't sell the same way to that segment anymore; I've got to do something different. But I can grow, if what I'm offering is strong enough. I don't need for the market to be growing in order for us to grow. So sometimes when we get into these discussions we end up debating, and we keep throwing facts out there. And I wouldn't so much dispute the facts, but it never seems quite logical that therefore we abandon the high end.

Frank: Let me just clarify a little bit, because I know it comes across as "put all your money in my segment." All right. You know it's clear that, relatively, the core business is by far the no growth segment. The challenge is to find some way to find a competitive advantage in that segment that makes it still worthwhile to do it. But to do it in the context of the old paradigm, to keep throwing money against it, which is what I think we've been doing, that is not a good idea.

Ian: I'm not trying to do a point, counter-point, because that has trapped us a couple of times. In looking at the market opportunities, you could make a case that there are great opportunities at the low end, but then one has to ask the question: what's your

capability of accessing that market within a period of time?

So we can get trapped in a discussion about what the market opportunities are when the question is, are we really capable of serving the lowest tier of the market as a company? Do we really want to go down-market? Is that where we want to take the company? How far down do we want to go? Do we want to fight with the other people down there or not? Most of us have already decided in our own minds what the answers to those questions are.

Frank: Could I just try it again, though? To me, we're missing a competitive advantage in the core business. The one we had is all worn out, and we need a new one to justify continued investment. I think it deserves thought, work, and study. I don't know the answer, but it's worth finding out.

Ian: We made conscious decisions to broaden our product line in the core business so that we wouldn't continue losing share. That was not an accident; it was a set of decisions that we made very carefully. And we have been doing that. So now the question is, do we want to change that? Should we deal with something as fundamental as that decision?

Frank: My assumption is that the strategy is on the table here. . . . I'm not advocating that you go invest in my strategy. What I'm advocating is, Don't invest in your segment until we have a very clear competitive advantage in terms of what you expect to get out of it. And I think it's missing.

Ian: And the point I was trying to make, perhaps overstated, is that I believe that we did make a decision in the company to say that the core business per se was getting a little bit tight and competitive, and we needed to have a broader base. So we may be in a

period of time in which the investments in those decisions have not yet paid off, and so I'm just trying to be sensitive to the fact that some things may not be in pay off mode.

Frank: (Throwing up his hands in frustration) It sounds to me like you're trying to take certain questions off the table.

The question of how to improve Elite's performance has all the makings of a hot topic. While the team has access to objective facts and shares a common goal—turning the firm's performance around—the interests and beliefs of those at the table are not shared and the stakes are extremely high. After all, the firm's future (and theirs) depends on making the right choice. Under these conditions, managers tend to dispute which facts are relevant (facts about different ends of the market versus facts about the firm's capabilities), disagree over the meaning of facts (take the same facts in different directions), and make different predictions about an uncertain, unknowable future (what will improve performance). When this happens, the advice researchers offer about how to avoid relationship conflict breaks down (Edmondson and Smith, 2006).

This exchange illustrates well what Eisenhardt et al observed—namely, how quickly a task conflict can deteriorate: "A comment meant as a substantive remark can be interpreted as a personal attack. Anxiety and frustration over difficult choices can evolve into anger directed at colleagues. Personalities frequently become intertwined with the issues. Because most managers pride themselves on being rational decision makers, they find it difficult—even to acknowledge—let alone manage—this emotional, irrational dimension of their behavior."[6]

All of this is at play here. When Frank makes a substantive remark about the core business, anyone might have responded. But Ian quickly jumps in to defend the business as if he, as its leader, is under personal attack. Ian then goes on to accept Frank's data but to reject the conclusions Frank draws from those data. Frank, who tells me later that he's worried that they'll

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[6] Eisenhardt, Kahwajy and Bourgeois (1997), p. 1.

keep sinking money into a failing business, throws his hands up in frustration and accuses Ian of taking "certain" questions off the table. Finally, as Eisenhardt et al would predict, none of this gets acknowledged, let alone managed. From this point forward, not only did the substantive task get lost, interactions like this one continued for months, causing rifts within the team that prevented them from improving the firm's performance quickly enough to succeed.

Most intriguing, this all happened despite Frank and Ian's best efforts to avoid these outcomes. Notice the care they each take to clarify their motives ("I'm not trying to do a point-counter-point;" "I'm not trying to get us to invest in my business rather than yours"), to qualify their views ("To me, we're missing a competitive advantage . . . . "), and to acknowledge their shortcomings ("And the point I was trying to make, perhaps overstated, is. . . .).

More important, they each tried to do what current research suggests they should do. Frank reminds the group of their shared goal: "We're here to discuss what the strategy ought to be." He suggests different alternatives for proceeding (exploring different technologies and segments; giving the question thought, work, and study). He cites facts in an effort to resolve their differences and to reach consensus, pointing to a study that shows the growth rates at different ends of the market. Yet these data not only fail to resolve their differences, they exacerbate them when Ian uses the "same information" to go in a "very different direction." In the end, despite their best efforts to avoid the point-counterpoint debates that have trapped them in the past, they fail, and a frustrated Frank shifts the team's focus onto Ian's motives.

So what exactly happened here? How did a substantive task discussion so quickly devolve into a relationship conflict, in which Frank questions Ian's motives?

As illustrated below, four cognitive mechanisms combined to trap Ian and Frank in a relationship conflict despite their efforts to avoid it.

Naïve realism. Cognitive research suggests that when people disagree, most assume that they themselves are operating rationally based on an objective view of the facts, while others are hopelessly biased and self-interested (Bar-Tal, Kruglanski, and Klar, 1989; Robinson, Keltner, Ward, and Ross, 1995). According to Ross and Ward, people in everyday life assume that their actions and beliefs are based on a rational interpretation of reality and that others with access to the same information will share their interpretation (Ross and Ward, 1996). When others don't share their interpretation of the same information, they conclude that the others are too lazy, too irrational, or too biased by self-interest or ideology to see reality rationally. From the naive realist's point of view, then, data aren't interpreted; they speak for themselves.

This is how Frank appears to see things when he says, "You know it's clear that, relatively, the core business is by far the no growth segment." Here Frank assumes the data are clear, as is their meaning. As a result, Frank assumes that if he gives Ian the same information he has, Ian will reach the same conclusion he does. But instead of agreeing, Ian uses Frank's information to go in a very different direction: "I can grow," he argues, "if what I'm offering is strong enough. I don't need for the market to be growing in order for us to grow." Therefore, Ian doesn't dispute Frank's facts, just their meaning: "it never seems quite logical that therefore we abandon the high end." Then, when Ian goes on to question the firm's ability to serve the low end and to assert that their current strategy hasn't played out yet, Frank concludes that Ian must be trying to take the question of the strategy off the table altogether. When I ask Frank what Ian said that led him to this conclusion, he reveals how he reasons in action:

Researcher: And what was it Ian said [that led you to conclude that he's trying to take the strategy off the table]?

Frank: That the decisions haven't played out yet, and therefore they should be untouchable until they have had a chance to play out.

Researcher: I heard him say they haven't played out. Where did you hear him say it was untouchable?

Frank: That leads to the obvious conclusion. [The rest of the group breaks out in laughter].

Frank's sense of obviousness is indicative of the naïve realist's perspective. While Frank's interpretation of Ian's behavior is one way of interpreting what Ian said; it is not the only way. We have no direct data on what Ian is or is not *trying* to do. All we have are data on what Ian *is* doing: disagreeing with Frank. And while those data show that Ian doesn't believe that the firm should switch course and go down market given their capabilities and preferences, it doesn't follow that he is trying to take the question of the strategy off the table altogether. All we can reasonably conclude from these data is that Ian disagrees with Frank about how to improve Elite's bad performance.

Even so, in a subsequent interview with Frank, he said Ian was too biased and self-interested to understand the situation the way he did. As cognitive psychologists would predict, it didn't occur to Frank that his own conclusions about Ian might suffer from the same tendency. In fact, he assumed that the situation was obvious and that his own view of the situation was objective, while Ian's was subjective, informed not by facts but by a desire to protect his business. Convinced that he had an objective lock on the Truth, which Ian wouldn't or couldn't face, Frank saw no way out of their disagreement and grew increasingly frustrated with Ian for causing the impasse. This suggests that Frank's reasoning, informed by naïve realism, played a role in converting a substantive conflict into a more emotional relationship conflict.

The False Consensus Effect. Cognitive research shows that people tend to falsely assume that others will make the same choices they make, leading them to believe that a consensus exists in a group when none does (Ross, Greene, and house, 1977; Marks and Miller 1987; Ross and Ward, 1996). This cognitive mechanism is also evident in Frank and Ian's exchange. After asking if Elite is capable of serving the low end and whether its leaders even want to, Ian tells Frank, "Most of us have already decided in our own minds what the answers to those questions are." Here Ian seems to assume, without checking, that the team shares his view that the firm is incapable of competing down market and that no one except Frank wants to fight with the people down there.

By this line of reasoning, Frank's argument is moot. It doesn't matter how much data Frank has or whether his conclusions about those data are right. According to Ian, a consensus in the group already exists: the firm is unable and unwilling to compete at the low end. Yet subsequent interviews with each team member did not support this contention. While half agreed with Ian and found Frank's persistence annoying, the other half were either undecided or inclined to agree with Frank's view. When I asked what led them not to say so, they cited comments like Ian's to argue that there was no support for a different view. Apparently, these team members took Ian's word for it that a consensus existed, even though none did.

Given Frank's belief that he has a lock on the Truth and Ian's belief that the group shares his view, the two stand little chance of resolving their substantive disagreement. From this point forward, Frank and Ian can only miss each other, which is exactly what happens. Frank continues to speak in terms of market data while Ian continues to speak in terms of capabilities and wants. Frank continues to cite facts to support his view while Ian continues to appeal to a group consensus to support his. While both may be partly right, neither is likely to discover it.

It is this unintentional—but nevertheless co-created irreconcilability—that contributes to the frustration and anger that turns a task conflict into a relationship conflict.

Fundamental Attribution Error and the Actor-Observer Bias. Cognitive research has long documented two cognitive mechanisms that inform everyday reasoning (Nisbett and Ross, 1980; Lidzey and Aronson, 1985): the tendency when observing others to over-emphasize dispositional explanations and to under-emphasize situational explanations (fundamental attribution error), and the tendency when acting to emphasize situational factors and to downplay dispositional ones (the actor-observer bias).

As I discovered from my interviews with Frank and Ian, these two mechanisms also played a role in their exchange. Both expressed intense frustration with the team's lack of progress, and both were stumped by the other's failure to see things his way. In each case, they attributed the other's persistence not to situational factors but to their character or motives. Ian said Frank was too aggressive, too ambitious, too quick to jump to conclusions, only interested in his part of the business, not general manager material. For his part, Frank said Ian was too slow to move, defensive about his business's performance, afraid of looking like a failure, too protective of the company, a good example of what's wrong with the company.

It didn't occur to either of them that the other might hold his view for substantive reasons or have legitimate concerns. Nor did it occur to them that the other might be clinging to his views not because of narrow self-interest or deficient character but because of situational factors: neither one of them was listening to or exploring the other's views. This situational factor in part led both of them to feel unheard, compelling them to persist. That is, when it came to explaining their own persistence, they switched explanations and pointed to situational factors: the other's disregard for his view, time pressures, the stakes, and so on.

Implications. This exchange illustrates how four cognitive mechanisms—all operating outside managers' awareness—convert task conflict into relationship conflict whenever teams discuss hot topics. This raises the question: if managers are made aware of these mechanisms, can they transform them, allowing them to focus on substantive tasks longer and to make the most of any relationship conflict that erupts? The remainder of this paper explores this question.

Putting Relationship Conflict to Work

No study to date has documented a single benefit to engaging relationship conflict. In fact, the prevailing consensus is that relationship conflict should be avoided at all costs. De Dreu and Van Vianen (2001) make an especially compelling case for this argument by examining three responses to relationship conflict: (1) contending with others and trying to impose one's will, wishes, and perspectives upon them; (2) collaborating with others to work out a mutually acceptable solution; and (3) avoiding relationship conflict whenever it arises. Of these three responses, both contending and collaborating were negatively correlated to team effectiveness and satisfaction. Only the third response—avoiding relationship conflict—was positively related.

These findings are surprising because other studies show that efforts to avoid relationship conflict only make it more dysfunctional by breeding mistrust. According to these studies, people who seek to avoid relationship conflict do so by trying to disguise or silence their negative reactions towards one another (Argyris, Putnam, and Smith, 1985; Argyris, 1985). Such efforts rarely work, however, at least for very long (Stone, Patton, and Heen, 1999; Smith, 2008). Try as managers might, people's reactions eventually leak out in their tones of voice[7] or get communicated through the corporate grapevine (Smith, 2002). Consequently, very few managers

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[7] Jehn (1997) and Amason (1996) find that task conflict quickly turns into relationship conflict when people raise their voices, suggesting that efforts to avoid relationship conflict may not only be unsuccessful but contribute to creating it.

remain totally oblivious to others' reactions; most end up resenting the cover up as much as they resent the reactions themselves. In the end, avoiding conflict seems to run a non-trivial risk of harming both companies and relationships (Perlow, 2003).

Still, if the only alternatives to avoiding relationship conflict are contending or collaborating, then avoiding may be the most effective response. But this may only be because the other two responses are so problematic. It's well documented that contending responses make resolution impossible and harm relationships (Fisher, Ury, and Patton, 1991), and research on the unspoken thoughts and feelings of managers suggest that most managers—even those claiming to collaborate—seek to control situations and to win (Argyris, Putnam and Smith, 1985).[8] If so, despite their apparent differences, the two approaches are often designed to achieve the same end (winning) and are likely to create the same result: diminished effectiveness and satisfaction.

Whether or not this is actually the case, the possibility led me to wonder if managers might be trained to engage relationship conflict constructively—that is, in such a way that satisfaction and effectiveness improve. The case that follows demonstrates that it is possible. This case shows that, given the proper tools and the proper context, managers are capable of a fourth and more effective response to relationship conflict: reflecting and reframing, first alone, then together. This response allows managers to see and transform the four cognitive mechanisms that turn productive task conflict into dysfunctional relationship conflict. No longer captive of these mechanisms, managers are more able to stay cool, even when discussing hot topics, and they are more able to cool down when a relationship conflict erupts.

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[8] Argyris et al (1985) have documented two dominant approaches to threatening situations: high advocacy (asserting one's views unilaterally, making an airtight case, discounting others' views) and high inquiry (easing-in, asking leading questions, qualifying views). Both approaches are designed to win and to maintain unilateral control. While no direct data exist on the behaviors De Dreu and Van Vianen term contending or collaborating, I suspect that "contending responses" include advocating behavior, while "collaborating responses" include easing-in behaviors.

The Merrimac Case. Merrimac is a fast-growing professional services firm founded by a group of friends just out of business school.[9] Two members of the top team are in substantive disagreement: Merrimac's CEO Dan Gavin and one of his direct reports, Luke Turner, who heads a new business unit called Upstart. A year earlier, Gavin convinced the Merrimac's board to promote Turner and to invest in his unit. The two share common data on the unit's performance, and they share a common goal: growing Upstart's revenues while controlling its costs. But they disagree over how to best achieve that goal and over the rate of growth needed to get the business unit up and running successfully. Anxious about an upcoming board meeting, in which Dan has to report Upstart's results, Dan sent Luke the following voice-mail:

> Luke, we've got a problem, and we have to discuss it soon. You're not making decisions fast enough. You're being too bureaucratic and making too many decisions by committee. It's not just *your* unit that's losing momentum; it's slowing down the whole company! I don't know whether you're risk-averse or just anxious, but it's a problem. Last year, you and I convinced the board that investing in your business unit was central to the firm's growth. They bought it, and now you're not delivering. They expect results, and we've got none to speak of. I don't know what I'm going to say to them when we meet next week. The sooner we can connect on this the better. [Click.]

This voicemail has all the makings of a dysfunctional relationship conflict: negative attributions about Luke's character coupled with intense emotions. When Luke first heard Dan's message, he was "mad as hell," reporting later that he was feeling and thinking the following:

> How dare he say the unit isn't moving fast enough?! We've done a lot—built a leadership team, launched new programs, improved profitability. And with no thanks to him. He's not once returned my voice mails asking for guidance on how to move forward. If we're

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[9] This case study draws on case material presented in Smith, 2008 and Edmondson and Smith, 2006.

going too slow, well, then that's his fault! I'm all for moving fast, but let's get real about

what's going on here. If he returned my calls, I'd be glad to move faster!

Before hitting the "respond" button, however, Luke caught himself, thinking:

Wait a second. What am I doing? That's not going to accomplish anything. If I retaliate

in kind, Dan will only dig in further and nothing will get done, and then Dan will be

right; we will be moving too slowly.

Aware of how quickly his reactions could escalate the relationship conflict and bring substantive

progress to a halt, Luke reflects on the past year from Dan's perspective, concluding:

He's right. It would be better if he weren't so negative about our progress, but I can see

how from his point of view we are moving too slowly.

No longer mad as hell, Luke sends the following voice mail response to Dan:

I'm with you. I agree we need to move faster. I'll make sure we meet soon to talk about

it. I have some thoughts on how I might speed things up, and I'd like to get yours.

Later that same day, Dan tells me that he relaxed as soon as he heard Luke's voicemail,

leading him to reflect on the "hysteria" in his own voice-mail. The next day, at my prompting,

Dan then shared those reflections with Luke, saying:

My voice mail made me realize that I have a sentimental as well as a practical interest

in your taking on more leadership in the firm. When I see you including a lot of

people in your decision-making, I get anxious it's going to slow you down and

undermine your credibility. But I feel like I can't say anything, because I don't want

to be seen as hovering, which of course I'm prone to do, since I'm so invested in your

success. Hence the hysteria.

These reflections helped Luke see that, as upsetting as Dan's reactions were, they stemmed from an understandable dilemma. In an effort to release Dan from that dilemma, Luke says:

> . . . part of the message was very helpful. Although you were rumbling me, you were very clear about what you needed. I'd have to be an idiot not to get it. 'Dan wants to go faster,' I thought. 'I want to go faster too. Let's go fast together.'"

Luke goes on to clarify that the problem isn't Dan's hovering. It is that Dan waited so long to express his concerns that by the time he raised them, he was on the verge of hysteria. These insights led them to strike a new deal: Dan agreed to raise his concerns earlier, while Luke agreed to make it easier by asking Dan for his concerns. At this point, they return to the task at hand: how to speed up the rate of progress in Luke's unit. By the end of the meeting, Luke had agreed to modify his decision-making process, and Dan had agreed to modify his tendency to go silent. In the following weeks, neither one sat back and watched to see if the other changed. Instead, they continued to reflect on their interactions and looked for ways to improve.[10]

Transforming Faulty Cognitive Mechanisms

When Luke and Dan's substantive conflict triggers a relationship conflict, they reflect and reframe, first alone, then together. Though Luke is mad as hell when he hears Dan's message, he stops himself before escalating the conflict, reflecting on what happened and reframing his initial reactions. This allows him to respond more constructively to Dan, who relaxes when he hears that Luke is receptive to considering his concerns. More relaxed, Dan can now reflect on and reframe his own reactions. In so doing, he realizes that his "hysteria" says as much about his own anxieties and about his own interests as they do about Luke's management

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[10] De Dreu and Van Vianen found that helping behavior was negatively correlated with relationship conflict. Evidently, when you have the one, you don't have the other—that is, unless you intentionally develop helping behaviors, as was the case in my study.

style or the pace of growth in Luke's business unit. When the two next meet, this helps them reflect constructively on their interaction as well as on their substantive differences, leading them to see things they hadn't seen before—things they use to deepen their understanding of each other and to join together in picking up the pace of growth.

As illustrated below, Luke and Dan's response to conflict is informed by two tools: the Ladder of Reflection and the Mapping Template. These tools allow them to reflect and reframe in such a way that they shift perspective, transforming the cognitive mechanisms that convert task conflict into a relationship conflict and that make relationship conflict such a destructive force. By using these two tools to reflect and reframe, managers can stay on task longer and turn any relationship conflicts that erupt into a constructive force. Below I describe the two tools, then discuss the optimal context for learning how to use them to reflect and reframe.

The Ladder of Reflection. This well-known concept helps managers reflect on and reframe both task and relationship conflict by illuminating the steps they take from some larger stream of data to their different conclusions about what those data mean (see Table 2). When managers see the many steps they take to arrive at a conclusion, they realize that their conclusions are far from obvious fact; they are abstract interpretations based not only on facts, but on the theories, beliefs, and values people use to select and interpret those facts.

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Insert TABLE 2 Here
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As a result, the Ladder disrupts three cognitive mechanisms. First, it makes it harder to view the world through the lens of naïve realism by revealing how abstract managers' conclusions are and how reasonable people can arrive at different conclusions. Second, it suggests that people differ, not because they have flawed dispositions, but because their different

theories, beliefs, interests, and values lead them to focus on different facts or to make different meaning out of the same facts. Third, it makes it harder to assume that a consensus exists by showing how easy it is to interpret the same situation differently.

As the Luke and Dan case illustrates, instead of tossing around clashing conclusions either about the task or about each other, these two managers help each other retrace the steps they took from some data to their conclusions, allowing them to see and learn new things. Luke uses the Ladder to look at his unit's results from Dan's perspective. Dan uses it to reflect on his "hysterical" reactions to Luke. Both use what they learn—about the task and about each other—to come up with a better solution *and* to strengthen their relationship.

The Mapping Template. This second tool helps managers reflect on and reframe their relationship conflict, so they can use that conflict to learn as individuals and as a team. As Figure 1 shows, this template asks managers to do two things that disrupt problematic cognitive processes. First, it directs attention to how each person's actions make the other person's actions more likely, interrupting the fundamental attribution error. That is, the map shows that each person's behavior isn't a product of his disposition alone, but a response to the situation—in this case, the other person's behaviors. Second, it helps each person see what he ordinarily can't see: what he himself is doing, not just what other person is doing. As a result, instead of blaming each other for causing the tension and annoyance that is the hallmark of relationship conflict, managers can do what Luke and Dan did: get to work on changing the pattern, so they can create better outcomes. This response is significantly different than contending, collaborating, or avoiding—all of which perpetuate and fall prey to the cognitive mechanisms implicated in relationship conflict.

In their efforts to change the mapped pattern, managers like Luke and Dan soon discover that they must change their own behavior, so they can bring out the best rather the worst in each other. This creates the impetus for learning and change and defines the direction of both: understanding and transforming the way they think, feel, and act when faced with hot topics. In this way, the mapping template helps managers use their relationship conflict to promote the kind of learning and change needed to improve individual and team performance (Smith, 2008).

Insert FIGURE 1 Here

Shifting Perspective. These two tools together allow Luke and Dan to shift perspective (see Table 3). As the table below shows, the *either/or perspective* on the left reflects the four cognitive errors, discussed here, as well as their behavioral consequences, while the *relational perspective* on the right corrects these errors, thereby altering their behavioral consequences.

When managers reflect on and reframe their conflicts, as Luke and Dan did, they are able to shift perspective, transforming the cognitive mechanisms that turn task conflict into relationship conflict and make relationship conflict dysfunctional.

Insert TABLE 3 Here

Developing the Ability to Reflect and Reframe

Reflecting and reframing is not a frequent response to conflict. If anything, it goes against the grain of the three prevailing responses studied by De Dreu and Van Vianen. Unlike the avoiding response, reflecting and reframing engages and uses relationship conflict, and unlike

contending or collaborating responses, reflecting and reframing is used in the service of learning, not in the service of winning or maintaining control.

This poses a challenge for management teams interested in developing the ability to draw on this response when confronting conflicts. Under real life conditions, stakes are usually too high and trust too low to experiment with new responses.

To adopt a new response to relationship conflict, managers need a context that supports experimentation. As Edmondson (1999, 2003a, 2003b) has shown, managers learn and innovate more quickly in an environment that is psychologically safe. It is possible to create such a context by doing three things: reframing mistakes and failures (Edmondson, 1999), reducing the stakes by taking relationship conflicts off line when time is scarce (Smith, 2008), and by building grounded trust (Edmondson and Smith, 2006).

Implications

Researchers who conclude that relationship conflict should be avoided arrive at this conclusion because none of the responses managers currently use to respond to relationship conflict correlate with team effectiveness or satisfaction. That conclusion may be true in terms of how teams currently operate, but it says nothing about the potential of teams to operate differently, and in so doing, to use relationship conflict to create positive outcomes. In this respect, prior findings may be an artifact of the research method used.

When no current response is effective—not contending, collaborating, or avoiding—-action scientists seek to invent new responses and to examine their effect on outcomes of interest to managers. The new response explored in this research is reflecting and reframing, using the two tools discussed here: the Ladder of Reflection and the Mapping Template. Results to date suggest that by learning to reflect and reframe with these two tools, managers are able to shift

from an either/or perspective to a relational perspective, transforming the underlying cognitive mechanisms that fuel relationship conflict and make it unproductive.

No longer captive to problematic cognitive mechanisms, managers are more able to set both task and relationship conflict to work for purposes of learning. In the teams I have studied, this learning not only served to improve their performance, it strengthened their relationships so they could effectively handle whatever type of conflict came their way (Smith, 2008).

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TABLE 1:
Contrasting Cool and Hot Topics

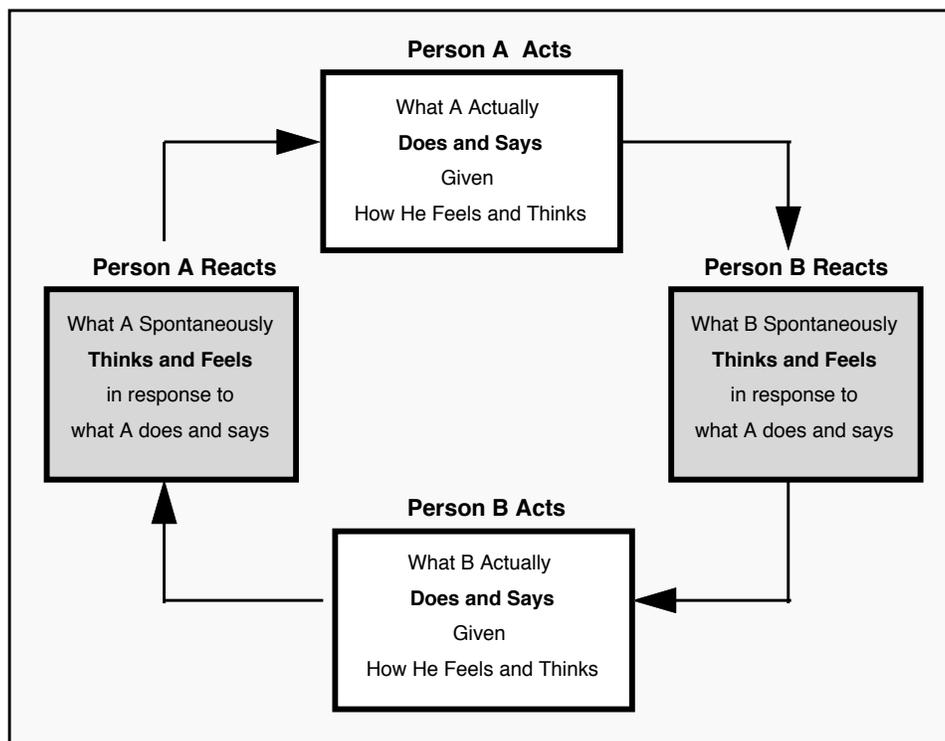|	**Cool Topics**	**Hot Topics**
Data	Accessible, relatively objective, conducive to testing of different interpretations	Controversial and/or inaccessible, interpretation highly subjective, different interpretations hard to test
Level of certainty	High	Moderate to low
Stakes	Low to moderate	High
Goals	Largely shared	Differ based on deeply held beliefs, values, or interests
Discussion	Reasonable, fact-based, collegial	Often emotional, lack of agreement about which facts matter and what they mean, veiled personal attacks likely

SOURCE: Edmondson and Smith (2006)

TABLE 2:
The Ladder of Reflection

Inferential Step		**Managers Use Some Theory, Belief, Interest, or Value To**
Step 1:	**Select**	Select some data from a larger stream of data.
Step 2:	**Describe**	Categorize or score that data.
Step 3:	**Explain**	Understand what causes what.
Step 4:	**Predict**	Anticipate what will happen next.
Step 5:	**Evaluate**	Assess the desirability of predicted outcomes.
Step 6:	**Decide**	Decide what the "right" course of action is.

SOURCE: Smith (2008). Adapted from Argyris et al (1985)

FIGURE 1:
Mapping Template

Person A Acts

What A Actually
Does and Says
Given
How He Feels and Thinks

Person A Reacts

What A Spontaneously
Thinks and Feels
in response to
what A does and says

Person B Reacts

What B Spontaneously
Thinks and Feels
in response to
what A does and says

Person B Acts

What B Actually
Does and Says
Given
How He Feels and Thinks

SOURCE: Smith (2008)

TABLE 3:
Shifting Perspective *

	Either/Or Perspective	Relational Perspective
Relationship Conflict	Assume the other person is the problem: "you made me feel this or do that"; "you gave me no choice."	Assume you're both contributing to your difficulties: "we're each failing to bring the best out of the other."
	Assume the other is either mad or bad—that is, crazy, stupid, incompetent, or immoral.	Assume you're each doing the best you can, given your capabilities and circumstances.
	Blame each other (to his face or behind his back), while seeking support from like-minded peers.	Explore what you each did to contribute to results neither of you liked.
	Make an airtight case, proving the other person is to blame and punishing him for it.	Map and alter patterns of interaction that repeatedly create results neither of you like or want.
Task Conflict	Assume one of you is right and the other is wrong.	Assume you each see things the other misses.
	Assume the rightness of your view is a matter of obvious fact, not interpretation.	Assume your different beliefs and interests will quite reasonably lead you to see things differently.
	Keep making assertions and counter assertions to get the other to agree or back down.	Say what leads you to see things the way you do and encourage the other to do the same.
	Garner support behind the scenes for your position, while undermining the other's.	Explore options in light of your interests, outcomes you both want, and data you both consider relevant.
	Build narrow coalitions that advance your own needs and interests at the expense of others, whether you intend it or not.	Build broad-based coalitions that seek to satisfy or balance, over time, the needs and interests of different constituencies and the firm as a whole.

SOURCE: Smith (2008) NOTE: The shaded boxes describe the assumptions underlying the perspective, the unshaded boxes the actions following from them.