

5 steps to handling clashing team members



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What makes team members clash?

What makes teams perform well?

What steps can minimise clashes
and optimise performance?

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Teams are an integral part of any organisation and whether the department be accounting, human resources, marketing, sales, IT or others, they have to work cohesively with each other. The work they perform is often goal directed at the individual, team and organisational level. The cliché often bandied around is ‘a team is only as strong as its weakest link’ and in tough times people are more than happy to associate certain failures with one internal conflict or mistake.

While some level of conflict is often inevitable, and can sometimes lead to innovation and stimulate critical thinking, clashing team members and a lack of effort to identify and remove issues can end in disaster. We look into the reasons behind conflicts and then recommend important steps and processes to make sure conflicts and team issues are identified early and minimised.

What makes team members clash?

Clashes among team members can arise due to a variety of factors including poor communication, unclear expectations, organisational culture and an individual’s role preference. Another factor is inherent personality traits which influence perceptions, work style, communication and interpersonal relations and are the most cited reasons for workplace conflict.

Experts have identified five personality traits evident in individuals that come into play when evaluating successful teamwork (Tasa, Shears & Schat, 2011).

1. **Conscientiousness** – achievement oriented, hardworking, dependable and organised. Conscientiousness has become a valid predictor of job performance as people who have high conscientiousness are thorough, motivated and organised.
2. **Agreeableness** – cooperative, warm and likeable. They are often the team member who will lend a helping hand.
3. **Emotional stability** – being emotionally stable refers to having appropriate feelings regarding an experience and acting accordingly. Those who have high emotional stability are more likely to remain calm during a crisis.
4. **Extraversion** – typically sociable, assertive, active, less introspective. Extraverts draw energy from people around them and are more likely to take on leadership roles.
5. **Openness to experience** – characterised by intelligence and being unconventional; imaginative, autonomous and nonconforming.

The combination of high levels of agreeableness, conscientiousness and emotional stability has been shown to be a good predictor of increased teamwork and decreased conflict, while those high in openness to experience can be the catalysts for innovation and creativity (Barrick, Stewart, Neubert & Mount, 1998; Bell, 2007).

Personality traits also play an important role in determining how team members handle conflict with others who are higher on extraversion and openness to experience; preferring compromise over the avoidance style of handling conflict.

While clashing personalities are often the major cause of workplace conflicts, the key is to focus on an individual's strengths rather than weaknesses and then utilise them to ensure a healthy balance. For example, agreeable people are much more adaptable and good at relationships so it would be worth ensuring a team member high on agreeableness is part of each group to keep the peace. The highly extroverted may need to be reminded to give other team members the opportunity to express their opinions.

What makes teams perform well?

Research has shown that how teams manage inevitable conflicts that arise is the crux of team effectiveness (Amason et al., 1995). Successful teams use conflict to their advantage to stimulate discussion and creative thinking while less successful teams avoid conflict or do a poor job in managing and resolving differences.

There is evidence (Behfar, Peterson, Mannix & Trochim, 2008) that strong group performance is linked to these three conflict resolution tendencies:

- Successful teams focus less on delivery style and alternatively focus more on the content of interaction.
- They justify the reasoning behind decision-making rather than merely distributing work assignments
- Assignment/task distribution is dependent on the level of expertise that each team member possesses rather than delegating or volunteering.

On the other hand, the research found that teams performing poorly took an 'ad hoc' approach to managing conflict—roles were never clear; the cause of problems was not identified or successfully corrected and there was no central/ coherent conflict management strategy.

Now that we have identified some suitable and overarching explanations for team cohesion and conflict regarding performance, we can use this understanding to find steps that reduce clashes and aim for a happier, healthier and most importantly; high performing team environment.

Step 1: Understand why the conflict has arisen

Considering why conflicts have occurred in the first place can act as a helpful fulcrum to interpreting the role personality plays in team dynamics.

Research (de Witt, Greer & Jehn, 2012) has shown that conflict and clashes among team members can be divided into three areas;

- **relationship conflict** (personality differences or differences in values)
- **task conflict** (content and outcomes of the task being performed)
- **process conflict** (logistics of completing the task)

The type of conflict that the team experiences can result in differing impacts and consequently have implications for how the situation is resolved. For task and process conflicts, a simple team meeting to work through the best solution may be enough to resolve the situation and may even lead to new process ideas and a more effective way of achieving the task goal. Conflict arising from personality or value clashes i.e. relationship conflict, will often have more negative and longer lasting impacts and can be more difficult to manage and resolve.

If the conflict is re-occurring, you can work backwards to determine what has caused the clash. Pinpoint when an operation or previous arrangement broke down then identifying

which factor of process, task or relationship was affected. Once you have this information you are better equipped to make the best use of effective communication to remedy the clash.

Step 2: Communication is king

An effective strategy to reduce clashes is to communicate clear expectations, establish a collaborative environment and find an optimum (not necessarily equal) way for all members to contribute given their capabilities. Clear and effective communication needs to remain the cornerstone in assessing a previous mistake or argument, and then in establishing new means of performance.

In ongoing performance enhancement:

Choose your strongest channel of clear and crisp communication that will be the ongoing 'go to' in all important task updates, changes and feedback. This could be email, Skype, calls, face to face, team debrief or anything else that can ensure that all intended parties give and receive the intended message. When trying to fix staff issues it is important to stick to a method that is immediate and informal rather than drawn out and formal to avoid further complications (Reznik, Roloff & Miller, 2012). It is important to develop a workplace culture that has a foundation of open communication; this will help foster trust and build strong workplace relationships, in turn reducing a build-up of conflicts

Step 3: Conflict resolution strategies

Following the identification of the problem at hand and setting clear communication channels, the task of developing strategies to move forward should commence. The following are some key steps to consider:

- **Act immediately.** Conflicts don't go away and can impact productivity, performance and workplace relationships so it's in your best interest to do something quickly.
- Meet with all people involved in the conflict individually. Information from these meetings gives you a clearer picture of the key issues, what each person considers important and the common ground.
- Summarise the key issues once you met with everyone concerned. Ensure that you pay close attention to everyone's needs as a failure to do so may lead to feelings that you are biased towards one person or another.
- **Encourage the people involved to discuss options for resolution.** Once the key issues have been established, get people involved to discuss their options to try and resolve the conflict. You should ask: "How do you felt this could have gone better?"

not “why didn’t you do better?” to get the correct information that allows for positive relationships.

- **Reality test the options.** Use “What if...” questions to help ensure that the suggested solutions are practical and will work.
- **Negotiation.** If people start negotiating at this stage, do not interrupt them but if you feel they are getting stuck at any stage it may be helpful to summarise what they have achieved so far and remind them of the agreements they have reached.
- **Ensure everyone involved is satisfied with the solutions offered.** Check in to make sure people feel heard and have had their needs met to some extent. Explaining to people at the start that resolution is often about meeting their most important needs, not all their needs, helps with setting up realistic expectations.

To ensure the particular conflict does not arise again, it’s essential not only to identify the issue but the nature of the conflict should be determined and assessed. Open communication to discuss process flows, breakdowns and what could have gone better can often elicit information on the cause of conflicts. Other conflict resolution strategies include voting, compromise or consensus and discussing and debating, just don’t let things carry on longer than they need to!

When working in a group for a long period of time, it’s easy to forget that the reason for the group’s formation was to utilise each person’s capabilities in an attempt to complete the task at hand. As each individual has their own strengths and weaknesses, each member of the group should familiarise themselves with their colleague’s attributes in order to reduce the likelihood for future clashes.

Step 4: What processes, behaviours and goals will change?

By not only examining what hasn’t worked, but what has worked well, a range of strategies focused on clarifying process and goals and establishing acceptable and non-acceptable behaviours can be implemented to try and prevent future conflict. The ability to critique is an essential skill to develop over time, however it is important to distinguish between criticizing a team member’s abilities and their ideas. Set rules and standards of behaviours early on and encourage positive feedback as well as constructive criticism. Establish and communicate the types of behaviours that will not be tolerated.

Start with small goals and work your way up instead of aiming to achieve an overall goal that is not easy or realistic to reach (Bryson, 1988). In terms of team processing changes, merely

assigning tasks more strategically as opposed to traditional allocation methods such as responding to volunteers or 'handballing' tasks to anyone could help your team function more effectively.

Step 5: Review and repeat

You may not get your intended changes and improvements right the first time. Team dynamic optimisation is about improving steps and processes, and therefore cannot be expected to go perfectly the first time. What you can do to speed it up however is be clear about how you're going to measure success and re-introduce goals further down the track.

What are your KPI's?

This could include anything from direct team and relationship related outcomes such as – less arguments, turnover, stress leave, complaints from other departments to goal and company related outcomes such as – more sales and enquiries, better feedback from customers, more task completions per week.

Clashes are a common occurrence when working in a group. These clashes can sometimes hinder group performance or alternatively, work in the team's benefit as resolving and overcoming the issue can strengthen relationships and allow the members to 'learn from their mistakes.'

While conflict is a normal part of workplace, the challenge lies in how to deal with it constructively. By understanding individual differences and the underlying cause of the conflict, a more effective and timely resolution strategy can be implemented.

Communication, collaboration and clarity can not only decrease the potential for clashes occurring but can help reduce the likelihood of them escalating. It is also important to remember that every conflict offers an important teaching/learning opportunity and the potential for growth and development (Lederach & Maiese, 2003). Use the learnings to create innovation and for team building and leadership development.

Want to create an ongoing system of performing teams?

Psych Press has a range of team building assessments available that cater to your team sizes and challenges. Be sure to chat to Dr. Gavin Didsbury on 03 9670 0590 to see what we can do to help get your team performing to achieve organisational goals.



[TeamContributor™](#) is designed to measure team member personality traits and capabilities within a performance context. Once assessments are complete, a Psych Press report with a psychologist's rundown will give you an accurate set of actions that will enhance team performance. [See how it works here.](#)

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