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Conflict Resolution in Project Environment

G P Sudhakar

In project environment there are chances of conflicts among team members, project managers and stakeholders. What are the reasons for such conflicts? What are the techniques to resolve these conflicts? What kind of conflicts can take place in software development teams and cross-functional teams? These are explained in this article. The role of arbitrator in conflicts is explained. The different stages of team development are also explained.

There are thousands of projects going on in the world and majority of these are being executed by teams. When working in a team there are chances for conflicts among the team members. There can be many reasons for conflicts. The article discusses the reasons for conflicting situations, conflicts and techniques to resolve conflicts and different types of teams and team development stages.

Different Types of Teams

A team can be homogeneous or heterogeneous. In homogeneous teams members are from similar background, viz., skills, education, age and experience. In heterogeneous

teams, which are refered to as cross-functional teams in the corporate terminology, members with different educational background, age and experience work together towards a common goal. For example, members from Marketing, Production, Human Resources and Finance form a cross-functional team.

In product development environment, we see cross-functional teams working together to develop and launch the product into the global markets. Usually the team formation differs based on the industry, product or service. In some kinds of teams, members with same educational background form the team. For example, a Bank or a financial institution will have majority of team members with finance as educational background. Some companies in software industry will have only graduates in computer science as the members of their product development teams. Based on the product or the service the team composition is defined. In some cases, the expert committee of the government consists of the people with diversified background. Now let us see the different stages of team development.

Team Development Stages

Every team in an organization undergoes specific life cycle. We can observe these team development stages in long running organizations such as IBM, Microsoft and HP, etc. Those team development stages are explained here.

Forming

In this stage of team development, a team will form in the organization with the available human resources. Introductions happen as part of forming stage. Team members come to know about each other in this stage of team development. Team members discuss about their names, experiences and background with each other. There won't be any informal relationships between the team members in this stage.

Storming

In this stage of team development, conflicts occur among team members. They fight for informal leadership in the team. Team members say work is work. There is less scope for cooperation among team members. It is better to allow the team to undergo this stage. If this stage is skipped, these conflicts may surface in the later part of project execution. In this stage of team development, there is less scope for trust among team members.

Norming

In this stage of team development, the team forms the ground rules of the project. They are known as Norms of the project. Once these norms are formed, the project execution becomes easy. Hence, this stage is very crucial in project development. Team members try to follow the norms formed in this stage. If some members don't follow these norms, they will be notified about the non-conformance.

Performing

In this stage of team development, the team starts performing. The team members start cooperating with each other. Give and take start in this stage of team development. The team reaches the peak stage as far as performance is concerned. Usually teams reach this stage once they complete significant amount of time in project execution.

Adjourning

In adjourning stage of team development, every team members is done with their project contribution. The team is going to dissolve in this stage. Team members are released from this project and allocated to some other projects. Team goes with learning experiences from the project useful for the organization. Basically, the team members are released from this project in this stage of team development.

These teams are lead by the project managers or project leaders. The individuals in the team may be with varied experience level and educational background. Hence, there can be a possibility of conflicts in the team. According to some other school of thought, conflicts are good in an organization. They result in different ideas and productive discussions. However, huge number of conflicts definitely reduces the productivity and can have negative affects in the organization. Human relations become stressful with the huge number of conflicts among the team members.

Conflicting Situations

Conflicts in the organization may occur horizontally or vertically or diagonally. The team members may get into conflicting situation with their peers, manager or any other functional head because of lack of cross-functional coordination. Usually, the team members in the conflict are responsible for resolving the conflict too. The managers can only act as facilitators.

If we consider the project manager, he will be talking to the stakeholders such as customers, vendors, suppliers, team members and their families, department heads, sponsor, senior management and users in his day-to-day activities. In dealing with all these stakeholders, the project manager may get into conflict with any of them. Conflicting situations may generate new ideas in some cases, while in some cases they may affect the productivity.

Now let us see the reasons for conflicts occurring in the team environment.

Reasons for Conflicts

There can be many reasons for conflicts in team environment. The reasons can be (Rita, 2005):

- Schedules.

- Technical Issues.

- Project Priorities.

- Resources.

- Cost.

- Personality Issues.

One should remember that the schedules are the first reason for conflicts while personality issues are the last.

Conflicts also arise if the team member is not clear about his role, about the management's expectations, if he did not understand the process, favoritism in the team by the project manager or the senior management, differences in compensation and conflicts in billing rates, etc. Poor project planning can also result into conflicts between different stakeholders of the project. Usually different stakeholders of the project have different interests and needs. Hence, if the objectives of the team members are not in line with the project objectives, then also there is possibility for conflicts in the project. If project objectives are clear and are communicated to team members, it may help in reducing the conflicts in the project.

Conflict Resolution Techniques

If the conflicts exist among team members, one can follow the conflict resolution techniques to resolve the conflicts. The conflict resolution techniques are explained as follows (Rita, 2005):

Withdrawal

Using this technique, the team member in conflict withdraws his argument. Hence, the opponent wins the argument. This is a lose-win situation. Usually this is not a suggestible way of dealing with conflict.

Smoothing

Using smoothing technique, the team members discuss the issue for some time and go back to their cubicles. Once they reach their cubicles and start thinking about the conflicting situation, they come to know that the conflict still exists and it was not resolved. This may not be the right way of resolving a conflict. The problem surfaces again in this kind of situation.

Compromising

Using this kind of conflict resolution technique, both the members in conflict goes a step backward and compromises on the issue. Both the team members go a step backward in the discussion and come to compromise.

Confrontation/Problem Solving

This is supposed to be the best way of resolving conflicts. By keeping facts and figures in the discussion, the conflict gets resolved using problem solving approaches. This creates win-win situation for the members in conflicting situation.

Forcing

This technique creates win-lose situation for the member. The member, who applies the forcing technique, wins the argument, while the other one loses the argument. This may not be the best technique many times. The managers can use their legitimate power and apply this technique to resolve the conflicts some times. The project managers may apply this forcing technique based on the situation with care on their team members.

Usually conflicts are resolved at a stage above the level where they occur in the project or the organization. That is, if a conflict occurs between a project manager and his team member, the conflict resolution is usually done by the manager of project manager. That is, conflict resolution is done at one level above the origin level of the conflict. The conflict resolution can be position based or interest based. The interests of the parties involved may be security related, recognition, sense of belongingness, or control over one's life (Roger, 1991).

Role of Arbitrators in Conflicts

Basically, the project manager has to play arbitrator's role if the conflicts occur among different stakeholders of the project. There is possibility for conflicts between different stakeholders of the project such as suppliers, vendors, customers, users, team members, senior management and functional managers. If they get into conflicting situation the project manager may play the role of arbitrator in the conflicts.

If the conflicts are between different stakeholders of the project, in some cases a third party may involve in resolving conflicts between these stakeholders.

If conflicts are not handled properly they become disputes. There is an institution known as "The Chartered Institute of Arbitrators (CIArb)" based in London with more than 11,000 members across 100 countries. This institution is a center of excellence for global promotion, facilitation, and development of all forms of dispute resolution. It also provides membership and training facilities to individual practitioners of dispute resolution. If an individual is new to this discipline, they provide one day training program which leads to the Associate membership and the experienced professionals can directly apply for the membership of the institution.

Conflict with Stakeholders

In a project environment, there is possibility for conflicts between the project manager and the stakeholders or among the stakeholders themselves. If the conflict is between the project manager and the stakeholders, the project manager can use the above mentioned conflict resolution techniques in resolving the conflicts. If the conflict is among the stakeholders the project manager has to play a facilitator role, and with the help of facts and figures, the project manager has to resolve the conflicts among the stakeholders.

The project manager may even get into conflicting situations with the customer related to schedules, scope or cost of the project. In this kind of scenario, the project manager has to use his negotiation and conflict resolution skills in resolving the conflicts with the customer. Similarly, the project manager may get into conflicts with the vendors and suppliers related to costs and payments.

The project manager has to interact with the users during the course of the project. If the project does not meet the needs, wants and expectations of the users, conflicts may occur between the project management team and the users. Hence, the project manager has to have good communication and negotiation skills in dealing with stakeholders.

Avoid E-mail Wars

Usually, in modern days, the conflicts may arise in the form of e-mail wars. It is better to avoid these e-mail wars in conflicting situations and get the parties involved to the negotiation table. It is better to use the above scientific techniques in resolving conflicts.

Usually in case of virtual teams, these e-mail wars are very common because team members are distributed across locations geographically.

Conflicts in IT Projects

Usually there can be conflicts among the team members in IT projects. The conflicts may occur in requirements gathering stage, design stage, coding stage or the most famous testing stage of IT project. Usually, programmers and test engineers get into conflicts during integration and system testing stage. The customer and the performing organization get into conflicts during acceptance stage of the project. Also the customer and the performing organization can get into conflicts during requirements sign off.

The team members may get into conflict with the project manager during work allocation and task schedules. The project manager may get into conflict with vendors regarding cost issues. He may get into conflicting situation with his manager or senior management regarding project priorities and status update. Like this, there is scope for conflicts at every stage of the project. Hence, the project manager has to use his power in addition to the conflict resolution techniques for the proper execution of the project. The project manager should also manage the stakeholders properly to

avoid the conflicts, which affect the productivity. Identification of stakeholders and managing them is very important for project managers to reduce the number of conflicts in the project.

Conflicts in Cross-Functional Teams

Usually in product development organizations, it is common to form the cross-functional teams. Team members from different business functions such as marketing, finance, human resources, production, operations and engineering form the cross-functional teams. In software product development environment, requirements come form the marketing team or based on the standards or based specifications given by the bodies such as Object Management Group (OMG). For example, OMG has given specifications for Common Object Request Broker Architecture (CORBA) and Unified Modeling Language (UML).

If the requirements come from the marketing team, there is possibility of conflict between the engineering teams and the marketing teams regarding completeness of the requirements. Once the product is delivered from the engineering team to the support team, the support team should understand the known defects and the features of the product. During this transfer of knowledge, the engineering team should give the complete transition to the product support team. There is possibility of conflict between Quality Assurance (QA) team and Engineering team during product testing. Hence, at each stage it is better to define the process clearly and have reviews at each stage so that it reduces the conflicts in product development environment. In conflicting situations, it is better to use aforementioned discussed techniques to resolve the conflicts.

Conclusion

In an organization, there can be teams with different team development stages. Hence, by observing these team development stages, the project manager can make calculated steps while project execution. If he encounters any conflicts in the team, he can use the techniques in resolving the conflicts. With these conflict resolution techniques and his powers the project manager can lead the project towards the success.

(G P Sudhakar, Consulting Editor, Icfai Research Centre. He can be reached at purna24@hotmail.com).

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