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Conscious Conflict

Despite the self-reliant focus of our formal training as software engineers, our profession entails significant human contact. Most likely, we will experience some conflict with coworkers, bosses, subordinates, customers, or suppliers. Constructively resolving these differences can make or break our ongoing relationships. It can also determine how effectively a group of people will transition through the stages of team development (see the "Stages of Team Development," *IEEE Software*, July/Aug. 1999, pp. 90–91). Effective conflict resolution thus significantly impacts the quality of our jobs and even our lives. Skills to constructively handle conflict are typically not part of a software engineer's training. Not surprisingly, HR departments frequently offer courses to help us, although we sometimes ignore them because we don't have enough time or we dismiss the topics as being too touchy-feely.

STRATEGIES AND BREAKTHROUGHS

The challenge to conflict is to catch it before it turns into an unpleasant and unresolvable rift. This collection of strategies should help us deal with conflict and help move us toward a constructive resolution. Note this is by no means an attempt to eliminate differences of opinions. The variety of perspectives that contribute to problem solving is a resource to be valued and leveraged into our products and services. Nor is it an attempt to get people to avoid conflict. Conflict is like a suppressed sneeze—one way or another, it will find expression. The goal is to be conscious at the flash point of our deeply ingrained conflict response and to have several alternative approaches on hand. Pat Heim offers a lengthier and highly entertaining dis-

cussion on this topic in her audiotape "Conflict Strategies" (<http://www.heimgroup.com>, 1998).

The first and most significant strategy point is to take steps to avoid becoming defensive or putting other people on the defensive. If we go on the defensive and attempt to justify ourselves when we perceive a verbal attack, it simply escalates the conflict. A more helpful approach is to do the following:

- ◆ stop and let the other person talk;
- ◆ actively listen and gather more information about your transgressions;
- ◆ echo the problem back to the attacker until they agree that we've characterized the situation from their perspective, even though we might not agree with them; and
- ◆ look at the problem from their perspective, and if you see how they might have a legitimate concern, say so.

For example, suppose that Mary expected a delivery of software from Joe on a specific day, but Joe didn't deliver it, and the integration team had to put off the build, which in turn threatened to delay the build process. The integration team attacked Mary for not having her build ready in time. Mary storms into Joe's office, angry about this attack because it was Joe's fault. She doesn't know that Joe's boss pulled him off his software development to handle an emergency bug fix at a customer site. Joe could easily go into a defensive posture; however, it would be more effective for him to keep quiet and actively listen to Mary's problem. He might paraphrase the problem as, "You were expecting a delivery of software from me on Wednesday and when you didn't get it, they really laid into you, is that what you're saying?" Joe could further legitimize her position saying, "You know, if I had been in that position, I

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would have been pretty steamed, too." The dynamics of the conflict will fundamentally change if Mary feels her perspective was heard, and she is less likely to continue storming at Joe. Once the defenses go down, they can consider constructive alternatives.

A second conflict strategy is to describe the offending behavior rather than evaluating the person. When people feel evaluated, they usually go on the defensive, and this is what we want to prevent. For example, it might be more productive to say, "It feels like you're not listening to me when you work at your computer while we're talking," than to say, "You're really rude." The former describes the troublesome behavior rather than judging the person.

A third strategy is to give "I messages" instead of "you messages." With I messages, the focus is on speaking your reality rather than trying to impugn the value, motivations, or cold bloodedness of your colleague. With you messages, it is far too easy to trigger defensive reactions. For example, rather than telling Brian, "You're a terrible programmer. I can't follow a thing you write." It might be more constructive to offer, "Whenever I review your code, I have a hard time following it, and I see there are no comments to help me understand it."

A fourth conflict strategy is to focus on the future rather than dwelling on past transgressions. Get a clear understanding of the problem and propose a way to avoid or reduce the problem in the future. For the first example, Joe might say, "In the future, if my boss pulls me off to do something that will impact my delivery to you, I'll let you know immediately."

It's also important to distinguish what type of conflict you're having. There are content conflicts and relationship conflicts. With content conflicts, people can usually verify a fact-based difference in some way: "I think the software is spending most of its time thrashing between applications." With relationship conflicts, something in the relationship needs to be resolved: "When you keep interrupting me during my presentation, it feels like you don't respect my point of view." The people involved need to be clear about which type of conflict is happening so they can solve it on the right plane. If you try to solve a relationship conflict with a context solution (or vice versa), the problem will keep coming back because there was no real resolution. For example, whenever these two very senior software engineers I knew tried to work together, they kept fighting about the facts of the situation. In

reality, they had a relationship problem. They kept trying to dominate each other—neither of them felt like they got the respect they deserved from the other. Until they come to terms with their conflict, the protracted debates over facts will continue. It's also possible to have a content conflict along with a rela-

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tionship conflict. In that case, the people involved should solve their relationship conflict first.

TIPS AND POINTERS

Here are a few other constructive tips for dealing with conflict:

- ◆ Avoid using the absolute terms "always" and "never" in describing behavior. For example, "you never come to the meetings on time" can easily push people's hot buttons. Stick with more relative terms: "In the last three weeks, I noticed that you arrived a half hour after the meeting started."
- ◆ Avoid pointing at someone in an accusatory way. It's guaranteed to inflame defensiveness.
- ◆ When someone approaches you with a conflict, and you can't engage at that time, tell the other person exactly when you'll reenter the discussion. Otherwise, the other person will feel dismissed and be further angered.
- ◆ If possible, work through conflict in a private setting. People tend to resist changing their positions if there is an audience.

Conflicts will happen in just about any work setting. Creative tension is part of the job landscape. If constructive conflict is stifled, or if you're not permitted the option of speaking your own truth, then it might be time to consider looking for a less oppressive work setting. However, assuming conflict will take place, then it's important to help make the conflict as constructive as possible. We need to take the time to hear our coworkers and colleagues out and to constructively address everyone's issues.

Being able to be open about our own issues and receptive to others creates an excellent working relationship where we can trust that our problems will get resolved. This openness leads to cohesion among coworkers and forms the basis of a high-performing team. ❖