

Building Conflict Competent Teams

Craig E. Runde
Tim A. Flanagan

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Praise for *Building Conflict Competent Teams*

“This book takes conflict competence to a whole new level—beyond enhancing individual skills to the ever more important team setting. Full of informative, helpful tools, tips, and guidance, teams and team leaders will learn how to transform conflict into opportunity and increase their ‘teamness.’ Through meaningful stories and examples, exercises, and specific techniques, the reader learns how to manage emotion, communicate more effectively, and overcome obstacles to resolving conflict in team settings.”

—Kathy Bryan, president and CEO, International Institute for Conflict Prevention & Resolution

“In today’s fast-paced lifestyle and culture, leaders and organizations increasingly face challenges and obstacles created by internal team conflict. Runde and Flanagan teach us that not all team conflicts are bad, and those constructive team conflicts, if managed and integrated properly, can lead to dynamic improvements in team creativity and production. Now, in *Building Conflict Competent Teams*, you can learn the principles that will help you lead your team to the top of its game.”

—Ben J. Hayes, president, New York–Penn League

“A very practical, easily understood approach to team conflict management. Runde and Flanagan provide real-life, easy-to-relate-to examples and actionable ‘how to’s’ with useful application tools.”

—William K. Rusak, executive vice president, human resources, Corrections Corporation of America

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*To the “small town girl and the lucky Marine,”
my parents, Jeanne and Pat Flanagan, who provided
the climate I needed early in life. And to Harriet and
Charles McIntire, the parents of my wife, Mac,
who provides all I need now.*

*To my loving parents, Gerry and Barney Runde, and
my wonderful wife Kathy’s parents, Patricia and John Fenn.
They have shown me that a sense of humor can
help through life’s conflicts.*

Preface

The idea for this book developed from a conversation with our editor, Kathe Sweeney. We were exploring various options for a follow-up to our first book, *Becoming a Conflict Competent Leader*. After discussing a number of ideas and alternatives, Kathe suggested looking at teams and conflict. The moment she said this, we all knew it was the right idea.

Over the years, we have worked with numerous teams that have struggled with conflict. Many have endured the dysfunctions that come from poorly managed conflict. We have observed strained interactions, dwindling communication, the absence of information sharing, and stalled initiative. We have witnessed previously collaborative, creative, vibrant teams grow distressed and uncertain about how to recover. We have seen relationships and productivity suffer.

We have also personally experienced conflict in teams. Conflict may be inevitable, but it does not have to lead to poor results and damaged relationships. It is possible for teams to work through conflict confidently, although this can be challenging at times. In fact, we believe that conflict handled effectively can inspire creative solutions to problems, provide the foundation for stronger relationships, and result in confident, more capable, and highly productive teams.

Our goal in this book is to help teams discover how to get the best out of conflict while navigating through the obstacles, discomfort, and challenges it can bring. We examine the nature of conflict in teams, as well as the emotional, behavioral, and

process approaches you can use to help your team become conflict competent.

Outline of the Book

This book begins with a real story about a team that faced a number of uphill challenges and difficult conflicts. It shows that conflict can bring both positive and negative results, depending on how a team addresses it. This is followed in Chapter Two with a look at when and how conflict emerges in teams. You will see why conflict is a regular feature of team life and why it is so difficult for teams to manage effectively. Understanding the reasons that conflict is challenging provides hints about what teams need to do to get the best out of it.

Chapters Three and Four, the heart of the book, examine how teams can rise to the challenges of conflict. In Chapter Three, we analyze what teams must do to create an effective climate for dealing with conflict. Without such a climate, team members will not have sufficient trust and emotional control to be able to talk with one another openly and honestly when conflicts arise. Without openness and honesty, the true nature of issues cannot be explored, and conflicts will fester as people assume the worst about others' intentions.

Chapter Four introduces and explores specific constructive communication behaviors that enable teammates to discuss issues in ways that lead to satisfying resolutions instead of contentious finger-pointing. While creating the right climate is a necessary step, constructive behavioral responses produce the interactive foundation on which teams can build to achieve breakthroughs. The consistent use of constructive behaviors among team members helps keep the climate positive for future interactions. Chapters Three and Four also provide team leaders with suggestions about ways in which they can help their team improve its climate and communications.

In Chapter Five we look at techniques to use when, despite having the right climate and using constructive communications,

conflicts present tough challenges. These techniques can help teams get things back on track when conflicts have stalled productivity, damaged relationships, or stifled creativity. These tools can help teams reestablish the climate and communication necessary to fuel continued development and success.

Changes in technology and organizational structures are creating new kinds of teams. In Chapter Six we examine how virtual teams can address conflict given the limitations associated with technology-mediated communications. These teams face many of the same challenges as teams that meet face-to-face, but they have to do so with different kinds of communication approaches. We also look at teams made up of members from different cultures because cultural differences can lead to conflicts and complicate the process of resolving them.

In the final chapter we provide some practical tools to help you get your team started on the road to conflict competence by assessing how well your team currently manages conflict. In addition, we provide some specific suggestions to improve the conflict climate in your team, as well as your ability to communicate constructively. We have also included a Resources section at the end of the book listing organizations that provide services that can be helpful to teams addressing conflict.

Acknowledgments

We would not have been able to write this book without the help and support of a great many people. First, we acknowledge Kathe Sweeney, Brian Grimm, Maria Meneses, Mary Garrett, and the extraordinary team at Jossey-Bass who make a project like this possible.

We also thank James Deegan, vice president and dean at Eckerd College. Jim, our boss, has consistently supported our writing, and his encouragement has meant a great deal to us. We also thank our colleagues at the Leadership Development Institute at Eckerd College, who have provided feedback and advice along the way.

We received suggestions, assistance, and stories from friends and colleagues, team members and team leaders, executives and experts. The list includes Matt Jones, Brad Williams, Joe Tomaselli, Jay Feaster, Jay Preble, Gary Shelton, Michael Kossler, Ben Hayes, Sharon Grady, Joe Carella, Joanne McCree, Wayne Jones, Maggie Dunn, Dennis M. Dennis, Susan Gunn, Amanda Pace, Sherod Miller, Michael Rawlings, Maya Hu-Chan, Ken Bradt, Robert Prescott, Peter Maida, Kim Kanaga, Sue Raub, Ethan Mayefsky, Laurie Kelly, Judy Ringer, Ann Mooney, Patricia Holahan, Allen Amason, Kathy Jehn, Astrid Homan, and Lindred Greer.

We spent many hours discussing our progress, or lack thereof, in some of our favorite dining establishments in St. Petersburg. Thanks to the owners and staff of The Chattaway, Skyway Jack's, Tangelo's Grill, Spartan, and Munches for patiently allowing us to commandeer tables for more than just a meal.

Finally, we thank our families for putting up with us during the long stretches when we were more focused on the book than our loved ones. Our wonderful wives, Mac and Kathy, have given us moral support throughout the process and unparalleled practical assistance in proofing the copy. Our children have been pillars of support as well. Tim is grateful for the many brilliant suggestions and observations from Lindsay and Kyle. Craig thanks his son, Matthew, for his substantial help with research and transcription. Both of us thank Matthew for creating the figures in the book.

Finally, we thank the teams and team members who have allowed us into their worlds. Their willingness to share the reality of their experiences with us, their pain and frustration, their struggles and dismay, their joy and elation, their commitment and satisfaction, provided true inspiration. Most of all, this book is for you.

St. Petersburg, Florida
April 2008

Tim A. Flanagan
Craig E. Runde

Building Conflict Competent Teams

1

A TEAM IN CONFLICT

In the middle of difficulty lies opportunity.

—*Albert Einstein*

We love a good story. You know the kind we're talking about. Our favorite stories share common themes of underdogs thrust into pivotal roles, good people persevering, a few unexpected twists, and ultimately a celebration of good triumphing over evil. The very best ones get passed on from generation to generation and beg to be retold time and again.

We hope the story we're about to tell shares these characteristics. At the very least, we hope it is one you will feel good about sharing with others. Oh, one more thing: this story is absolutely true. We'll reveal the identity of this rather amazing real-life tale a few pages from now. Until then, take note of the conflicts contained in the storyline. Look for the impact of each conflict and how these conflicts were addressed. See if you can find value in how the conflicts were handled. We also hope you find yourself guessing at the identity of the organization. So don't look ahead. Just sit back, relax, and enjoy.

The Organization

The organization had long aspired to be thought of as world class in a highly competitive industry. Over the years, it had gained a reputation for being long on potential, but it had failed to reach and maintain the peak level of performance and results for which it was founded. Only once in its sixty-year history had the organization been considered truly one of the best in its class.

This achievement was short-lived, considered a fluke, and never again attained.

The organization had many characteristics that were the envy of its competitors. Its facilities and offices were top notch. State-of-the-art equipment and tools were in place. The investment in education and training of personnel was second to none. The organization's board and stakeholders were generous with their support. Executive leaders and content experts were among the most experienced and talented in the world. Their product was truly a source of pride for all associates. And consumers were willing, even eager, to embrace the organization and its product. Despite all these stellar characteristics, the organization somehow seemed to wallow through its existence, never producing the kind of results for which it seemed so capable. Potential evolved into frustration. Eventually frustration led to a changing of the leadership.

The Search

As the board searched for the right executive to take over the reins, the search committee found the organization to be a tougher sell than they had anticipated. The board was committed to recruiting the very best leader available. The compensation package was certainly worthy of a world-class leader, and the challenge of leading this well-known but underachieving organization seemed likely to spur the interest of the very best of the best. As time passed, the search committee found itself in the unlikely position of seeing its top candidate bow out of the running. Left with but a few solid candidates, the board decided to offer the top position to a man who was well known in the field and had significant experience and a compelling record of success, but he had never presided over an organization of this size and significance. He was also known for his intense, driving, even demanding personality. He demonstrated this characteristic during his final interview when he made two rather

unique requests of the search committee and the board. First, he suggested a radical new method of operations. Second, he wanted their support for embarking on a nationwide search for talented employees. And he wanted to personally spearhead the search and the subsequent orientation and training of these new associates. In fact, without these accommodations, he said he would not consider accepting the position if offered.

The search committee pondered their decision. The risks were weighed, résumés reviewed, and candidates discussed. In the end, the committee decided to offer their prized top leadership role to this experienced and admittedly demanding man, whom we'll call Bert. Amid appropriate fanfare, he was introduced as the organization's best hope for finally fulfilling its promise.

Finding New Talent

Bert was thrilled with the opportunity and poured himself into his new role. True to form, he set out to find the most highly talented staff available. Because he had years of experience in the industry, he knew exactly where to look. Many of those he targeted for recruitment were well known to him from past industry competition and conferences. He knew that to find the most talented people, he would have to recruit from a number of different organizations, some of them fierce competitors. Within a few weeks, he contacted scores of experts and invited them for interviews and testing. And with the board's blessing, he hired a "lieutenant," whom we'll call Pat, to assist him in his recruiting, selection, and training efforts.

Over a fairly short period of a time, Bert and Pat whittled the field of potential new associates down to about two dozen. Some of the candidates withdrew their candidacy in reaction to Bert's methods and approach. Others privately wondered whether they would want to work for a man seemingly so focused and intense. Some questioned the wisdom of recruiting people who

had openly, sometimes brazenly, competed with one another in the past. In addition, the business practices and standards of these competing organizations were often markedly different. The potential for conflict among the new staff seemed incredibly high. Those who ultimately accepted the offer to become new members of the organization knew that they faced a steep challenge.

Conflicting Perspectives

Bert created an orientation and training process designed to leverage the best attributes of his newly hired team. He had already drawn criticism over his selections of personnel; some of the board members, in fact, openly questioned his judgment. Bert's response was that each person had been selected to fill a specific role on the team. He admitted that not each person was the top expert in his field. Rather, he likened each new person to a piece of a larger puzzle. Each piece needed to fit perfectly. In his quest for that perfect fit, he demanded thoroughness of preparation and an unrelenting focus on fundamental knowledge and skills. His newly hired charges sometimes grew weary of Bert's passion and tireless drive to craft the members into a single unit. He expected his staff to embrace his vision and pursue it with conviction. Unfortunately, his expectations were not always met.

To make matters worse, a number of the new associates carried baggage from previous relationships and interactions with one another. Several members were absolutely incensed that some of their new colleagues had been competitors, even enemies, in their previous work. One example of the bad blood among the group involved a prestigious industry award that had been bestowed on a company from Minnesota. Several members of that organization were now among Bert's new recruits. As luck would have it, several members of the second-place company for that award were also new members of Bert's organization.

The award had been hotly contested, and the winners were accused (by the second-place organization) of unethical practices that led directly to the award. Not surprisingly, the bitterness of that event carried over into the new organization and contributed to the rift among team members. Moreover, some of the new associates' best friends had been rejected for positions in the firm in favor of those with whom they had competed in the past. It seemed virtually impossible to fathom that this group would be able to work together as associates, somehow putting aside past differences.

Finally, there were moments when Bert and Pat failed to see eye-to-eye. As Bert pushed his troops to stretch beyond their previous limits, Pat sometimes questioned his tactics. Team members complained to Pat about Bert's demanding standards and practices. But Pat absolutely believed in Bert's expertise and supported the notion that the new team members had to work as one in order to be successful. Nevertheless, he occasionally wondered if Bert's tactics were aligned with their ultimate mission and goals. Pat found himself yielding to Bert's decisions often without sharing his thoughts or perspectives.

As Bert pushed his agenda, patience and restraint among the workers wore thin. Tempers flared. Associates avoided one another. Teammates talked behind each other's backs. There were even a few reports of physical altercations. In addition, Pat privately wondered if Bert's passion was interfering with his decision making. Bert's grand design appeared to be in jeopardy. The board members who had hired him just a few months earlier began having doubts. Could their ultimate goal sink any further from realization?

Turning Points

As the weeks wore on, training sessions, exercises, and simulations gave way to real business engagements. Along the way, a number of events signaled that the organization was beginning

to come together. In one case, several associates took it on themselves to acknowledge and confront poor behaviors associated with the bad history among some of their teammates. This led to constructive discussions about the past and agreements to move forward. Another example involved the relationship between Bert and Pat. Bert began to more openly seek Pat's perspective regarding his approach and tactics. Pat confided that he questioned some of them. They talked and worked through their differences while forging an even more respectful partnership. In another case, near the end of one particularly demanding training session, one associate spoke passionately about the need for the group to work as one. This associate was later selected to become one of a few designated team leaders. These examples, and many similar others, showed a resolve to work through the differences, disagreements, and discord. But none demonstrated this organization's ability to deal with conflict better than the following.

Bert believed in training. He offered scores of opportunities for the new associates to participate in exercises and simulations to sharpen their skills, develop relationships, and establish the culture of the now restructured organization. Near the end of the orientation and training period, Bert brought in a new associate. This person had worked for Bert in the past and was a recognized expert and top performer. He was undeniably a great potential resource and asset for the team. Nevertheless, many associates objected to the introduction of a new teammate at this stage of the organization's development. Several sought a meeting with Bert to discuss their disapproval and disappointment over the introduction of the new associate. They described how the current members had formed a bond and that introducing a new member now could interfere with their team development. During their dialogue, Bert asked if the current team was the best it could be. The associates answered that it might not yet be, but that the trust they had developed was the foundation on which the organization could successfully continue to

build in its quest of their ultimate goal. Bert's eyes twinkled as he agreed not to upset the delicate balance that had been forged and subsequently released the new associate. The organization had come full circle.

Success

The new company took off. In the span of just a few days, its success was documented in the headlines of newspapers and as the lead story on newscasts. The team effort displayed drew praise from pundits far and wide. A sense of wonder and admiration grew from around the country, even the rest of the world. The years of frustration seemed to melt away like icicles glinting and dripping in the warm spring sunshine. The conflicts of the past few months paled in comparison to the sweet taste of victory and achievement. Bert's vision, his dream, and the dream of the entire organization had been realized. "Do you believe in miracles? . . . Yes!!" screamed broadcaster Al Michaels as he described the final seconds of the improbable victory on national television. The 1980 U.S. Olympic Hockey Team had defeated the highly favored Soviet Union team in the first game of the medal round. They went on to win the gold medal.

Upon Further Review

The gold medal win of the 1980 U.S. Olympic Hockey Team is arguably one of the biggest underdog achievements of all time. Its victory over the Soviet team, which had won over forty-five games in a row at the time, was dubbed the "Miracle on Ice." It is the story of teammates achieving through hard work and perseverance. It is the story of a leader (Bert is Herb Brooks) who provided focus, vision, and a belief in the team. It's the story of a team overcoming incredible odds, barriers, and limitations as they established a climate of trust and collaboration. It is the story of an assistant coach (Pat is Craig Patrick) who often

provided encouragement and support to team members. And it's a story that illustrates how a team handled conflict in ways that enabled it to succeed beyond its wildest dreams.

Ingredients for Conflict Competence

I (Tim) was a young man in graduate school in 1980. I remember watching the astonishing victory of the U.S. Hockey Team over the Soviet Union with some friends in my tiny apartment in Columbus, Ohio. We whooped our approval, toasted the players (who were roughly our age), and reveled in amazement. But I had no idea of the true depth of this team's achievement. At the time, I viewed it like virtually every other sports fan did: the incredible story of a bunch of relatively unknown kids defeating the best hockey team in the world. Today it's remembered as one of the biggest upsets in modern team sports history. I also submit that it is a wonderful example of a conflict competent team. Let's review several key characteristics of the 1980 U.S. Olympic Hockey Team that illustrate what it takes to achieve conflict competence as a team.

First, consider the climate the team was able to create in a relatively short period of time. Coach Brooks was clear in his vision of creating a new style of play necessary to compete at the highest level. He was equally clear that this new style would emphasize speed and conditioning. He spoke most often, however, about the team chemistry that would be necessary to implement the new style of play. Technique, skill, and ability alone could not produce the desired results; something more intangible was critical. Team chemistry, the climate, and the quality of the interactions between and among players had to be just right.

The coaches and players came together over a span of mere months. During this time, they established relationships resulting not only in the ability to read one another's moves on the ice but bonds that have lasted a lifetime. Their mission was admittedly unique: it required that team members didn't just

play hockey together; they became a family that literally worked, traveled, and lived together. Certainly most of the people reading this book are members of teams that work long, demanding hours but stop somewhere short of living together. Nevertheless, establishing the right climate is critical for handling conflict. Teams must develop trust, and team members must feel safe. Emotions must be handled with care. These essential ingredients of the right climate—trust, safety, and emotional intelligence—are necessary for building conflict competent teams.

Next consider the level of collaboration among the teammates. For the casual fan watching the games, the collaborative effort could be easily taken for granted. Most of us expect athletic teams, especially those performing at high levels, to be models of “teamness.” One of the defining characteristics of this team was the way the players came together and worked as a single unit during their amazing run at the Olympic Games. Their collaborative effort was based on a number of key factors. The team clearly had a specific game plan crafted by the coach, Herb Brooks. Moreover, the players embraced the plan, and everyone understood it. Everyone knew their specific role and accepted responsibility for fulfilling that role. Players held each other accountable. In the early stages of the team’s development, Coach Brooks was much more involved in holding team members accountable. As the team evolved, the players held one another accountable. Expectations were clear, and team members were committed to them. These factors led to a mutual accountability among the players that fed their collaborative efforts.

One way to describe the team’s method of working together is “complete collaboration.” A similar but slightly more expansive term that we will use throughout the book is *behavioral integration*. The highest levels of behavioral integration are characterized by mutual accountability, collaboration, collective decision making, and shared expectations. The 1980 U.S. Hockey Team demonstrated each of these at virtually every juncture of their development. (Collective decision making is probably the least

obvious of these characteristics. It was most evident in the later stages of development and was clearest during games and when the team traveled together. However, one of the best examples of collective decision making was illustrated when team members decided to confront Coach Brooks about the potential addition of a new player late in the training program.)

Finally, consider the quality of communication among team members. It's no secret that the team members had to overcome some significant emotional challenges and barriers as they developed into a high-performing team. Stories abound regarding the friction among players who had played for opposing college teams. In fact, a number of players from the University of Minnesota and Boston University had been involved in one of the nastiest college hockey brawls in memory during the 1976 NCAA tournament (Coffey, 2005). Not surprisingly, there was no love lost among these strange bedfellows. As the team experienced training camp together, players had to interact. In fact, the team concept that Coach Brooks demanded made it impossible not to interact.

A shining example of high-quality communication is illustrated by the way teammates resolved long-standing feuds. Teammates sometimes served as mediators for those who were at odds. Coach Patrick stepped in to help teammates communicate through their difficulties. At other times, teammates simply agreed to talk things out among themselves. Addressing difficulties is but one circumstance requiring productive communication. The most conflict competent teams not only address their difficulties effectively, they communicate constructively nearly all the time (no team is perfect). It is imperative that team members communicate frequently with clarity and care. We'll refer to this characteristic throughout the book as *constructive communication*.

In the movie *Miracle*, the silver screen depiction of the 1980 team, one of the most dramatic scenes depicts the aftermath of a lackluster performance during an exhibition game several months prior to the start of the Olympics. The game ended in