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Resolving Issues
Peacefully



Conflict Resolution

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Resolving Issues Peacefully and Effectively is a Team Effort

October 19th is “Conflict Resolution Day,” an annual event created by the Association for Conflict Resolution (ACR). The purpose of this global event is to create an awareness of peaceful methods for conflict resolution that can be used within workplaces, schools, families, the legal system and other areas of life.

Throughout my experience as a partnering facilitator, I’ve run into various teams with conflicts on construction projects, and witnessed first-hand the powerful role partnering plays in mitigating them. To commemorate Conflict Resolution Day, I’d like to share with you a method we use in partnering to effectively mitigate and harmoniously resolve conflict. It’s called the **Issue Resolution Ladder**. When used properly, team dynamics and the project thrive. But if not used or implemented the correct way, relationships break down and the team and project suffer.

Such was the case on a \$65-million project I facilitated on the West Coast. During one of their partnering review sessions, I witnessed the project managers from the contractor, construction management firm, owner and architect quietly entering the room with their arms folded. They were a year-and-a-half into a three-year project that was ahead of schedule and on budget, yet they weren’t talking.

A few minutes later, senior management from the owner and contractor strolled into the room, chatting and smiling, as if they had just shared the punchline of a good joke.

From both observations, it was apparent something was amiss. But, what was going on? The group was hitting (or ahead) of their marks for schedule, budget and quality, yet the team dynamics were noticeably challenged.

After some discussion during the partnering session, we learned that a few issues had festered at the project management level, yet no one had wanted to elevate them to the next level. The project managers were unwilling to negotiate their stance or seek help from senior management to remove the obstacle.

Why does this happen? In partnering, we discuss issue resolution, the path, timelines and rules around issue resolution. Still, a high-performing team can fall apart due to poor application of the issue resolution process. Below is a list of common pitfalls causing this.

1. **Fear of failure or the perception of others.** Field managers and project managers may view elevating issues as a failure, or they are afraid of how they will be perceived by their managers for not resolving the issue themselves. Studies show, that 95 percent of the time, and if you have a good senior manager, this is not the case. Senior managers do not want to let issues stall the project and want to remove obstructions to progress for the team.
2. **Lack of senior management engagement.** Senior management is not fully engaged with the project. It happens to even the best senior managers. They empower their project teams, get overloaded with responsibilities and aren't 100 percent engaged with what is going on within their teams and on the project. Effective managers not only know what is happening with the team, they know about specific constructability issues and are fully committed to the team's success.
3. **Problems defining the issues.** The issues aren't truly defined by the project management team, and we can't agree on the issue and a path to resolution. If we don't know what the issue really is, how can we begin to solve it? If the doctor can't diagnose what is ailing you, how can he prescribe a remedy?

What can we do as managers, leaders and team members to help resolve these issues faster and reduce the issues' impact to the budget, schedule and, ultimately, the relationship of the team?

1. **Mutually and clearly define the issue or disagreement.** Where do we agree? Where is the impasse? Agreeing on the issue and finding a way to memorialize it is the first step. The Regional Transportation Commission in Washoe County, Nevada (RTC) formalizes this escalation process. Team members document the issue, provide backup and then agree on a timeline to work to resolve the issue within the project team. If it is not resolved, they agree to disagree and kick it up to the next rung on the resolution ladder.
2. **Prior to an issue, agree to a resolution process that everyone has bought into, and agrees to follow.** This seems like a no brainer, and many teams already do this, however sometimes it becomes overly complicated and complex. On a recent project, a team had a pre-populated issue resolution matrix that took up an entire page. There

were over 30 names listed. This does more of a disservice to the issue resolution process. Will the ladder that we develop help or hinder the team? That is the question we should be asking. As a team, work to simplify the process and create an Issue Resolution Ladder that is easy to follow and will support the speed in which the team would like to resolve the challenges.

3. **Communicate the issue escalation.** When an issue is elevated, the project team must make each other aware of their desire to elevate it. Anyone can elevate the issue and leadership should encourage it. It is not a failure to elevate the issue, rather the failure lies in letting the problem fester. When the team elevates the issue, ensure that they are briefing the leadership on what has happened, what they agree on and where they disagree. Simply "kicking it up" without any context or background is dangerous. The danger lies in the potential for leadership to make a poor assumption or a delay in resolution.
4. **Strong leaders know when to push the issue back down.** When the leadership meets to review the issue that has been elevated, they should evaluate not only the issue, but how they might be able to empower the team to resolve this issue in the future. Or, determine whether it is an issue that should be pushed back down for further work and resolution.
5. **Proper documentation and communication.** Once an issue is resolved and is agreed to by the parties, it is documented and communicated to the team. These are business decisions and should be treated as such. Leadership should ensure that they communicate how and why the decision was made.

As much as we might try to engineer disagreements and unknowns out of the construction process, it is very likely that conflicts will occur. How we respond to them is what counts. If not embraced by the team, issue escalation can be a major challenge that can divide teams and pull them apart. When used as intended, it can empower team members, aid in the resolution of issues and help the team overcome any conflict that is thrown their way.



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