

Conflict Is Not a Four-Letter Word



By Andrew Stevens

Figure 1 – Don't let conflict get out of control in your project.

Photo credit: fizkes/Shutterstock.com

Imagine sitting at a large table in a small conference room, and the tension is building around you (Figure 1). The roofing subcontractor on your project has just revealed an unforeseen condition that is going to require a Request for Information (RFI). As photos of the issue are passed around, the shift in body language among the key players working on the project is obvious and their angst is palpable; the sound of moving office chairs crescendos as the last document is handed out. Questions circulate in their minds: How will this impact time? What about the cost? As they comb through the documented photos, it's as if the proverbial "Let's get ready to rumble!" announcement from a major boxing match has just gone off in everyone's head.

This is just one example of how conflict arises in the construction phase of a project. Typically, responses to work-related conflicts include at least one of the following: avoiding the issue entirely, projecting responsibility onto other team members, or

becoming defensive. Unfortunately, these responses can result in magnifying the issue by slowing a project down, and maybe even dividing the team by removing the very synergy required to complete the project with efficiency and excellence. While conflict is unavoidable, understanding how to respond to it in a healthy and professional manner is critical to any project's success.

Instead of trying to avoid and/or abruptly remove conflict, as consultants typically do, we can strive to benefit from conflict and make it work for us. In other words, how can we implement, and even nurture, constructive conflict? Constructive conflict can be defined as an open discussion where team members respectfully consider the input, feedback, and perspective of oth-

ers, resulting in a solution all parties find acceptable.

In life, I have found three key elements in any good relationship: communication, perspective, and trust. In our work as consultants, we would be wise to recognize these elements in our business relationships and apply that understanding in guiding the project successfully.

Leaders must look for legitimate reasons to provoke and uncover relevant, constructive ideological conflict. By doing so, they'll keep people engaged, which leads to more passionate discussions, and ultimately, to better decisions.

— Patrick Lencioni

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Figure 2 – The initial technique in effective communication starts with intentionally listening to the project team members.

COMMUNICATION

Communication is a key element in good relationships and in great project management. We all know it, but we struggle to achieve it. Managing communication—particularly during conflict—is an essential skill that consultants need to use because it is integral to any project’s success.

The initial technique in effective communication starts with intentionally listening to the project team members (*Figure 2*). The difficulty in this practice is that we can be unwilling to embrace the ideas of others. Or, we are so concerned with what our response is going to be that we don’t give them the opportunity to be heard. When individuals are not heard, their desire to disengage can become overwhelming.

The next technique is bringing the team members back to a central point of focus in project meetings and interactions/communications. Often, each team member will have a primary concern. For example, I was recently in a project meeting where the attendees included a project architect, general contractor, subcontractor, manufacturer, and the client. As a consultant, listening to what is important to the team while remaining unified on the central point of focus is critical. When we lead team members in conversations that provide momentum in resolving issues, not only is the time-

table moving forward, but relational equity is also built with our clients.

The third technique is providing clarity to the client.

Clarity is the removal of assumptions and ambiguity from a situation.

— Patrick Lencioni

There are multiple ways to illustrate this technique, but following are two examples.

First, there are times when a client desires to have every minute detail and every standard requirement scaled down and explained in layman’s terms. The client wants to know that issues are being taken care of and whether the project will be successful. In our misguided desire to display vast technical competency or specification knowledge, we can miss what is most important to our clients: protecting their product. Having high-level technical understanding is very important; however, when our desire to display our intelligence or knowledge becomes more important than valuing the desires of those we serve, we may have missed the point of consulting entirely. A mentor once told me, “Use 25 words or fewer to prove your point, because the 26th word can be used against you.”



Figure 3 – Everyone needs to be lifting in the same direction for a wall to be properly constructed.

A second example of providing clarity can be found in our response to conflict. For instance, there are times when a team member doesn't display or communicate the level of confidence that reassures the client when assuming responsibility for an issue. The "assuming party" in these cases could be attempting to completely avoid accountability, or to project their issue onto other team members. You've heard it said, "Well, the framer built it wrong," or "That's not what it says in the construction documents," or "If the right product had been ordered, it would have been done by now." The technique of providing clarity to the client is not only about the consultant speaking with brevity but also setting an expectation for the whole team to be clear in their communication and clear in accepting responsibility.

In *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, Patrick Lencioni wrote:

Teams that are willing to commit publicly to specific results are more likely to work with a passionate, even desperate desire to achieve those results. Teams that say, "We'll do our best," are subtly, if not purposefully, preparing themselves for failure.

PERSPECTIVE

Perspective is essential when implementing constructive conflict. During the progression of construction, each team member typically has his or her eyes set on one specific item; that one item, in their opinion, is the most important. Additionally, all of the team members could be looking at the same issue that is creating the conflict, but they're looking at it from different angles. The key to perspective management is to lead project team members to view the project not through their own lenses, but through the eyes of the owner or client.

Imagine, for example, that there are five members of a team building a wood stud wall, fairly large in size, so it takes more than one person to install. All five team members surround the framed stud wall laying on the ground, looking at the options for it to be lifted and set in place.

"We need to lift it this way," one member exclaims and then suggests his solution.

"Nope, that won't work," another says.

"I've got a better, faster idea. This is taking too long; we're running out of time and money!" the other complains.

Commitment cannot occur if people are unclear about exactly what is being committed to.

— Patrick Lencioni

"You're all crazy; it's just a wall! Do it my way and we'll be fine," demands the fourth team member.

Unfortunately, it's only a matter of time before their "teamwork" is jeopardized by the frustrated, bickering workers and their opposing perspectives. Even in this simple example, the most rudimentary of tasks can become difficult without a unified client and team perspective.

Managing perspective during conflict is so important because, if done effectively, all the team members can be looking at the issue from the same viewpoint at the same time. How much easier is it to lift a wall and put it in place if you all lift from the same side and at the same time, rather than lifting at different times and from different sides?

We find ourselves in circumstances like this—with even metaphorical walls—more times than not. With a little perspective and humility, a consultant can guide a project team gracefully toward the project's intended design (Figure 3). As a great quarterback directs a committed football team, a consultant can lead a committed project team to a successful project where everyone on the team wins—especially the client.

TRUST

No relationship exists without trust. Managing the communication and perspective of project team members as a part of practicing constructive conflict is in no way possible without first establishing a foundation of trust with

the client. Imagine a tall pyramid with multiple levels, and each level has a specific title and role in keeping the pyramid upright. The second level is "Conflict," the third level is "Communication," the fourth level is "Responsibility," and the last level is "Project Results." None of the levels is sustainable without a firm foundation of level one: Trust (Figure 4).

Trust is the oil that keeps the relational machinery running smoothly. It is not a luxury. It is vital!

— Dr. John Townsend

A project consultant may contemplate, "I'm under contract; shouldn't my client trust me because of our agreement?"

As a consultant, your contract with the client does not empower you to make decisions; the contract only makes you responsible for providing the services scoped in the contract. The client's trust in you, as his or her consultant, is

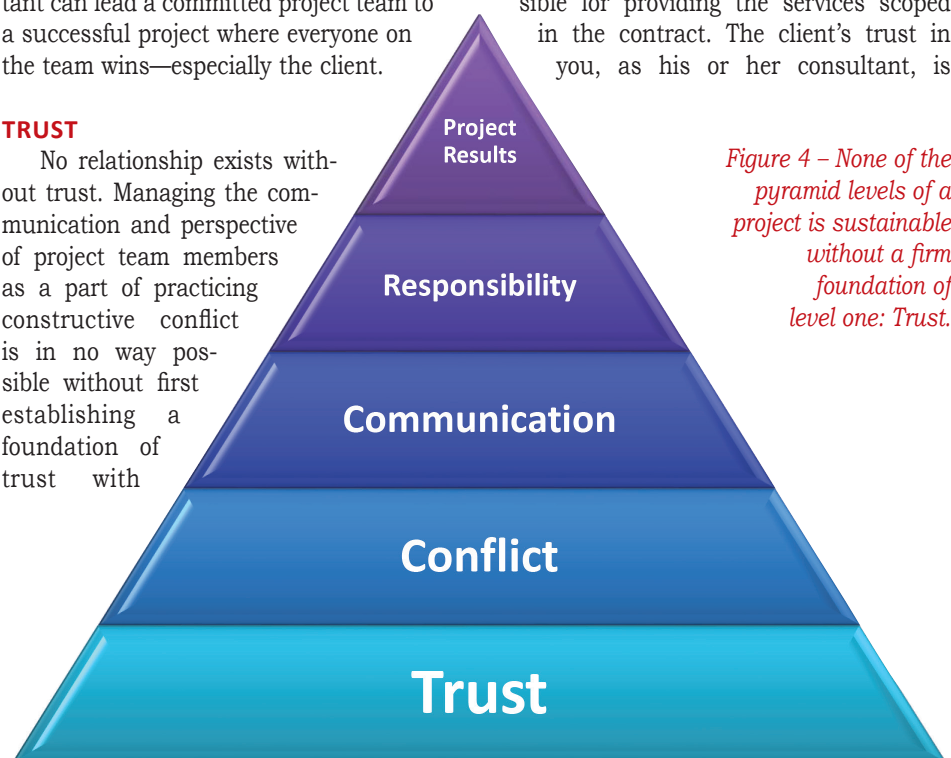


Figure 4 – None of the pyramid levels of a project is sustainable without a firm foundation of level one: Trust.

Trust is the foundation of teamwork. On a team, trust is all about vulnerability, which is difficult for most people. Building trust takes time, but the process can be greatly accelerated. Like a good marriage, trust on a team is never complete; it must be maintained over time.

— Patrick Lencioni

Overcoming the Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Field Guide for Leaders, Managers, and Facilitators

what empowers you to make the decisions to provide the scoped services with integrity and excellence. To put it another way, a contract may give you the role of a client's consultant, but earning a client's trust will empower you as their advocate. The difference in just being a consultant versus being an advocate is gaining and maintaining your client's trust.


I heard this statement from a general contractor on a job site a while back: "We want to get out of here as soon as we can!" Unfortunately, he was understood by the client to be expressing, "Time equals money," which led the client to assume he cared more about the money than ensuring the project work was done well. The ripple effect of this statement was

relationally negative to client trust for the duration of that project. As a consultant, it may not be possible to rectify lost trust between a team member and your client; however, it is possible to increase your client's trust in you by protecting their asset.

CONCLUSION

Conflict is good. "Good" is a four-letter word, I know. When consultants are aware of how to navigate conflict well and the benefits of conflict are understood, employing constructive conflict can be a consistent benefit for any consultant. This will require you to challenge yourself, to welcome the challenges by other team members, to step out of your "conflict comfort zone" and be vulnerable, and—dare I say—to be okay with the idea of failure. Your failure to communicate during conflict will high-

light the places you need to improve in managing conflict. It is okay to put your foot in your mouth; just don't do it twice—the taste of the first time should be an ample reminder not to repeat yourself.

Obtaining confidence with a constructive conflict mindset is only done by choosing awareness, maintaining consistency, and giving the learning process time. Track your development, remember what works and what doesn't, and seek constructive criticism from a leader you trust. By doing this, you may see improvements in your projects, growth in yourself, and results for your clients. And that is good! 



Andrew Stevens

Andrew Stevens's experience includes various areas of consulting, contracting, and project management. His demonstrated history of working in consulting has provided him with a unique insight into numerous aspects

of building enclosure consulting. He is a published author and public speaker, and he serves as an active board member for the IIBEC North Texas Chapter. It is his core belief that the foundation of consulting is about a genuine desire for serving others, self-awareness, and high character.

If team members are never pushing one another outside of their emotional comfort zones during discussions, then it is extremely likely that they're not making the best decisions for the organization.

— Patrick Lencioni

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LARGEST ROOFING COMPANIES

ENR magazine has released its Top 600 Specialty Contractors list for the 2018 calendar year, ranking U.S. companies by the revenue they reported to the magazine. Making the top 20 firms in roofing, with their 2018 revenue in millions of dollars were: Centimark Corp., \$627.6; Flynn Group, \$382.1; Baker Roofing Co., \$277.5; Nations Roof, \$200.7; Kalkreuth Roofing and Sheet Metal, \$134.2; Best Contracting Services, Inc., \$99.4; Schreiber Corp., \$73.0; The Roof Depot, Inc., \$65.3; KPost Co., \$63.1; Latite Roofing LLC, \$61.5; The Bulldog Group, Inc., \$58.4; Douglass Colony Group, \$48.7; Wayne's Roofing, Inc., \$38.8; Orndorff & Spaid, Inc., \$35.0; King of Texas Roofing Co., LP, \$30.0; Roofing Solutions LLC, \$27.5; Commercial Roofers, Inc., \$25.3; All-South Subcontractors, Inc., \$22.6; Western Specialty Contractors, \$22.1; and Wolfrum Roofing & Exteriors, \$8.2.