The Science Behind the Way We Work

Managing conflicts for improved collaboration

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"The absence of conflict is not harmony, it's apathy."

Kathleen M. Eisenhardt

1. Introduction: Radical shifts in the way we work

Successful organisations often consider effective collaboration as a crucial factor. Values such as collaboration, teamwork, and cooperation are commonly recognized as fundamental organisational principles that guide employees towards achieving exceptional results (Gino in 2019).

The European Commission is no exception to that. As an organisation, it strives to enhance collaboration to better meet the pressing policy challenges it is called to address by its citizens.

2. The Challenge: Navigating times of change and uncertainty

Collaboration is not easy. It does not happen by itself but requires careful design from the outset and continuous support from the various parties involved.

When collaboration happens between significantly diverse groups (known in the literature as cross-boundary teams), differences in roles, competencies, and interests can add an extra complexity to the fragile alchemy of effective collaboration.

The challenge is long-standing, and leaders often strive to successfully manage collaboration's complex equilibria to meet the most ambitious goals in their agenda. However, especially in the presence of internal boundaries, issues such as lack of trust, miscommunication, and interpersonal animosity may translate into paralysing conflicts and jeopardise the ability of a team to perform.

Understanding and coping with internal conflicts is therefore essential to enhance the possibility of successful collaboration.

3. The Science (i): Our brains do not like change

A number of studies in the psychology of conflict management and negotiation have shown a number of strategies that one can implement to ensure a smoother interaction between different parties involved and overcome the paralysing tentacles of conflicts more effectively.

3.1. The Science (I): Do not make it personal: Task-conflicts vs relationship-conflict

It seems to be a platitude that divergences in views within a team can hinder its performance and endanger collaboration. Indeed, one can easily predict how disagreements on the issues of their tasks, ideas, or solutions to problems can escalate into heated interpersonal disagreements and disrupt the required harmony to perform the required goal effectively.

However, research in organisational psychology has shown how the dynamics just described conflate two distinct types of conflicts:

- **Relationship conflict:** In relationship conflicts (also called affective or interpersonal conflict), disagreements within a team escalate into interpersonal hostility and in mutual dislike. In other words, a conflict becomes a relationship conflict when people "make it personal".

- **Task conflict:** In task conflicts (also called substantive or cognitive conflicts), disagreements between individuals remain on pure intellectual levels and concern divergences in how to approach or solve the problem at hand: task conflicts are about clashes of ideas and opinions rather than interpersonal quarrels.

Research has revealed how relationship conflict is detrimental to team performance and, in general, affects various important dimensions of collaboration and teamwork, such as well-being, work satisfaction, etc. (de Wit, 2013). Translating disagreements into interpersonal conflicts unambiguously sets collaboration on the path to failure.

Task conflicts do not necessarily translate into worse performance but can sometimes lead to the exact opposite. Indeed, healthy disagreements about ideas may enhance distal group outcomes such as group performance (Olson et al., 2007) by, e.g. enabling a more critical evaluation of ideas, improving decision quality, and avoiding groupthink (Schulz-Hardt, Brodbeck, Mojzisch, Kerschreiter, & Frey, 2006). As eloquently put by a group of researchers:

"The absence of conflict is not harmony, it's apathy" (Eisenhardt et al., 1997).

However, the fruits of healthy task conflicts can only be reaped in the absence of interpersonal friction and when individuals feel secure in a psychologically safe environment that encourages the expression of differing opinions, all intending to address the task at hand effectively (O'Neil et al., 2018).

Approaching collaboration with openness to healthy clashes of opinions can foster a more careful evaluation of available options, promote idea generation, and ensure the decision-making process attains the utmost quality.

3.2. The Science (II): Start by stressing commonalities rather than divergences

Task conflicts can be a valuable intellectual boost to improve decision-making quality and problem-solving. However, task conflicts should not be permanent: teams would never be able to accomplish anything if they kept on having endless clashes of ideas. Collaborative teams must agree on a common strategy to tackle their challenges eventually. An established line of research in public administration has revealed that a crucial ingredient of effective collaboration is achieving a shared understanding of the issue at stake and the best way to approach it (e.g. Kozlowski et al., 2006).

This is not always an easy state to achieve, and conflicts of ideas might translate into a deliberative impasse from which it might be difficult to escape. Research in the psychology of negotiation has shown how agreements between parties can be best reached if commonalities between the different parties are stressed from the outset (Cominelli et al., 2020). Expert negotiators spend 40% of negotiation time identifying and exploring commonalities as compared to 10% of the time spent by less experienced negotiators. This is consistent with evidence showing how sharing a "common mental frame", i.e. a set of shared assumptions and views on the issues at hand, improves mutual understanding and increases the likelihood of an agreement (Dewulf et al. 2011).

Looking for similarities between conflicting perspectives is not a way to avoid divergences but rather an effective strategy to shield from

a potentially paralysing clash of ideas that could endanger the entire collaborative process. "Common grounding" enables making differences, not a condition for persistent disagreement but opportunities for an improved agreement amongst the parties involved.

3.3. The Science: An antidote to black-and-white mindset: Complexify

People often simplify complex matters by slotting a multifaceted continuum of issues into two sets of clearly distinct categories. Psychologists have a name for that, it's binary bias. The binary bias can often engender conflicts by exacerbating the difference between parties into polarised positions. We saw how common grounding can effectively solve deliberative clogs that dampen the effectiveness of collaborative efforts. However, sometimes similarities are not easily within reach, and the binary bias impedes different parties involved might simply fail to find commonalities to table a productive conversation.

Psychologists Katharina G. Kugler and Peter T. Coleman have found a promising solution to disentangle polarised disagreement and find a middle ground between two starkly opposed views. They invited participants to the Difficult Conversations Lab at Columbia University and had them discuss polarised issues such as gun control and abortion (Kugler & Coleman 2020).

Before discussing, e.g. abortion, people were presented with an article on another divisive issue like euthanasia. Experimenters divided people into two groups, each reading different versions of the same article. After reading the articles, experimenters formed pairs of participants who held opposing views on the issue at stake and asked them to come to agree and write a joint statement on the issue. It is important to note how the two versions mainly differed in framing the issue. One version of the paper covered both sides of the issue, making a balanced case for and against euthanasia. People who read this version found an agreement on the subsequent conversation on abortion and signed a joint statement on the issue 46% of the time. This is by itself a remarkable result. However, something even more remarkable happened with the group in the other condition. Participants in this condition read a version of the paper that presented euthanasia as a complex array of issues with numerous shades of grey and no clear-cut moral solutions. Strikingly, in this condition, pairs holding opposing views signed a joint statement on abortion 100% of the time.

Strikingly, at a mere content, the two versions of the article contained the exact same information; they merely differed in how it was framed. Being merely presented with an opposing view does not seem to be the best way to open someone's mind, but rather an occasion for them to hold a defensive stance and stick to their gun. On the other hand, complexity, i.e. showing an issue not as a stark black-and-white opposition, puts people in the right mindset to overcome conflicts and search for a shared solution.

3.4. The Science: Create a sense of common fate via unifying goals

In some other cases, it is not uncommon for conflicts to arise not because of a lack of complexity but because of a complexity overload. Parties involved may find it difficult to locate a common thread in the overabundance of diverging opinions. This is where local interests can take precedence; local interests prevail over the need to find a common solution.

An established line of research has showcased how a strong sense of shared identity is a strong predictor of enhanced cooperation. A sense of shared identity can unify people around a sense of we-ness that can compensate for more local or individual interests (Sell et al., 2009). Evidence in organisational psychology has also shown a positive correlation between a strong sense of shared identity and numerous desirable employees' attitudes and behaviours, including enhanced cooperative behaviours (e.g. Badler et al., 2017).

An effective way to leverage a sense of identity in an organisational setting is to shape it around a set of overarching shared goals. Berkeley management scholar Morten T. Hansen more specifically recommends leaders highlight unifying goals that create a sense of common fate, with his words, "the best benefit of a common-fate goal is that it elevates the aspirations of people to something bigger than parochial interests" (Hansen, 2009, p.79).

A common goal can foster a shared sense of purpose that helps overcome conflicts and obstacles to collaboration. This is because it creates a collective identity centred around a greater purpose, transcending the interests of the various parties involved.

4.   ACTs (Actionable Tips)

From the sections above, we can draw the following main key pieces of advice:

❖ Do not turn a clash of ideas into an interpersonal quarrel.

❖ In the negotiation process, try to stress the commonalities rather than the divergences to increase the likelihood of an agreement.

❖ Avoid the binary bias, acknowledge the complexity of the issue at stake rather than sticking to a black-and-white mindset.

❖ Create a sense of shared purpose to overcome parochial interests.

Tip for tomorrow...

.... During your next meeting, start by collectively identifying the shared assumptions and objectives. Let the team start the work by reminding themselves of matters of agreement rather than jumping to the thorny issues of what you disagree about and set the collaboration on the right path.

In a nutshell
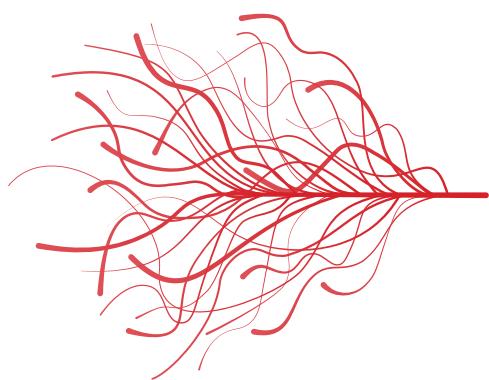
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The Challenge

Interpersonal and intellectual conflicts can jeopardise the effectiveness of collaboration. Good conflict management strategies are needed to avoid this risk.

The Science

Different from relationship conflicts, task conflicts can be beneficial to group performance. Common grounding is an efficient way to facilitate the reach of an agreement between parties. Presenting a polarising issue as a range of different opinions with many shades of grey increases the likelihood of an agreement. Unifying goals that create a common fate enhance cooperation.

The Solution

→ Do not turn a clash of ideas into an interpersonal quarrel.
→ In the negotiation process, try to stress the commonalities rather than the divergences to increase the likelihood of an agreement.
→ Avoid the binary bias and acknowledge the complexity of the issue at stake rather than sticking to a black-and-white mindset.
→ Create a sense of shared purpose to overcome parochial interests.

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