Groups: Problem-Solving and Decision-Making

Inquire: How did the Post-Reconstruction South resemble the Antebellum South?

Overview

Teamwork can bring many complications. Sometimes certain people in a group disagree on things. Sometimes you can’t get anyone to agree. Sometimes people try to get you to do something when you know you’re right about doing something else instead. All of these situations can be frustrating. This lesson will give you the tools to address problems in a group, diffuse interpersonal tensions, reach a group consensus, and hold your ground in a group setting.

Big Question: What is the hardest part of settling conflict in a group?

Watch: Problem-Solving

Have you ever been summoned for jury duty? If you haven’t, imagine what it would be like. If you have, and you were picked to be a juror, do you remember how the jury came to a decision? After listening to the entire trial, the jurors go into a room and make a decision about the case. This is done with a series of votes, discussion, more votes, and then, more discussion. This can continue for hours, but it's a process that (usually) works.

This process helps the jury reach a consensus. A consensus is general agreement by a majority of group members. Reaching consensus can be difficult. In this lesson, you’ll learn how to address problems, diffuse interpersonal tension, and stand your ground when necessary.

Let’s imagine a small group situation and see how they resolve the tensions that arise.

A football team, the Cougars, are down six points in a very important game. During the break between the third and fourth quarters, the captain of the football team gives instructions about which play to run next. Two of the teammates, Taylor and Andre, have a disagreement. Andre believes Taylor missed a block that caused Andre to lose the ball. This argument prevents the captain from speaking. So the captain, remembering how to diffuse interpersonal tension, asks each of them to explain their point of view. The two explain their points of view and why they feel the other teammate has made a mistake. As it turns out, while Taylor did miss a block, Andre had run the wrong play. This caused a mix-up and eventually an argument. After Taylor and Andre listen to each other, the two teammates apologize and are able to get back to the game.
This short example shows that when a group has conflict, it is crucial to communicate clearly, and even more importantly, to listen. No matter the conflict, this simple rule will usually de-escalate and resolve struggles that comes your way.

Read: Conflict in a Group

Overview

Inevitably, a group will face conflict. When that happens, it’s important to know the steps to address that problem, how to diffuse interpersonal tension, how to get group consensus, and when to stand your ground if you know you’re right. This section will provide you the skills to be able to do all of those things.

Steps to Addressing Problems

Addressing problems is a delicate process. You don’t want to step on anyone’s toes or go over anyone’s head. When a conflict arises, the first step is to identify the chain of command. If you know the chain of command, then you know who you need to bring the problem to.

The second step is talking to the person you have an issue with. If someone is causing a problem, tell them, and try to resolve the problem one-on-one. Explain the problem and brainstorm with them how it can be addressed. If your problem isn’t with a person, but rather with a system or access to needed material, you should skip to step three.

Step three is to take your problem to the first person in the chain of command. Your boss or manager will be able to handle problems that you can’t. If they are unable or unwilling to help, you may need to consult with someone in the chain of command above your boss. This option should never be your first choice. Your immediate supervisor is in that position for a reason, so start with them when you need a problem addressed that you cannot handle alone.

Interpersonal Tensions and How to Diffuse Them

Some problems in a group are issues with technology or processes. It’s much easier to identify a solution for those problems. The hardest problems to solve arise from interpersonal tension. Interpersonal tension is conflict between two or more people in a group. This tension can arise for many reasons. Maybe you have a difference of opinion with someone about how a task should be handled. Maybe someone tells a joke you don’t like. Interpersonal tension can arise from just about anything. The first thing you need to do to diffuse this is to identify the core cause of the tension. Until you know what is causing the problem, you can’t fix it.

Second, you need to talk with all involved to address the issue. This requires much patience as all sides explain their feelings on the issue. The only way this process will yield any results is if all parties communicate openly. Be honest about your feelings, but listen to what the other person has to say and what they are feeling as well. There is no one way to address tension in a group. Every problem needs a solution created for that problem. Accept that, and it becomes much easier to actually address the issue and get back on track.

How to Get a Group Consensus

Groups depend on getting people to agree on what needs to be done. Not all leaders tell people what’s going to happen; more often than not, the team will have some say in the process. When that happens,
the group needs to come to a consensus. Consensus is a general agreement by most of the people in a group. Reaching consensus involves several steps. First, the leader needs to explain all of the options. A group can't make a decision if they don't know what the choices are.

Second, the group needs to take a vote. This happens early in the process so everyone can see where everyone else stands. If everyone agrees from the start, there's no need to do more. If you don't know who does or doesn't agree with you, it's harder to know who you need to convince.

Third, ask everyone their reasons for their vote. If you don't know why they disagree with you, you can't convince them to change their mind. In the fourth step, you attempt to bring them to your side, allowing discussion of the options. People have opinions on the subject and hearing those helps all involved make the best possible decision.

Finally, it's time to vote again. If everyone agrees, you're golden. If no consensus can be reached, then you repeat the process until you have enough people that agree to a specific course of action.

When and How to Hold your Ground

Sometimes people in a group will try to convince you to change your mind. There are some instances in which you shouldn't change your mind and should instead stand your ground. If you are the expert on a topic, or if you have data to support your claim, then you should be the person the group listens to. You shouldn't necessarily be siding with the group just to speed things along. Data are facts or statistics backed by research. A claim is the argument you make. Often, a claim needs supporting data for it to be most successful. If either of these circumstances arise, it's important to know how to present your claim and explain why you hold the position you do.

First, stay calm. It can be frustrating when people don't listen to you when you know more about a subject than they do. Staying calm and communicating clearly, despite the frustration, will make your case stronger.

Additionally, communicate openly. Be frank and honest, and answer questions openly. Don't just assert your argument; listen to the other side. When someone else explains their opinion to you, consider it. But, if you decide to disagree with that opinion, don't brush them off. Explain why you disagree. An open dialog will result in the best outcome; it just takes some patience.

Reflect Poll: Causes of Tension

Is holding your ground in a group argument worth doing even if it causes tension?

- Yes
- No

Expand: Arguments 101

Overview

When someone hears the word “argument,” it usually brings negative images to mind. They might think of screaming, yelling, or angry conversations. This lesson will explain those misconceptions and what an argument actually is.
What is an Argument?

An argument is an exchange of ideas with the intent of persuading someone to change their attitudes or behavior. Popular media has, to some extent, distorted the meaning of this word to connote screaming matches, but that's not actually an argument. Arguments involve the presentation of an idea and a response. At the end, someone comes out as the “winner.” Because an argument is meant to be persuasive, the “winner” is the person whose argument is successful. If I argue with a friend about where to have lunch, and they ultimately agree to go to the restaurant I want to, I have “won” that argument. But, how do I get there? What do I need to do to “win?” Every argument has fundamental elements that you use to convince your audience. Every argument has a claim: a summary of the argument you are making. This is similar to a thesis in a research paper. It is one or two sentences that summarize the main point you are making. Then, an argument has a warrant. A warrant is supporting material that proves your point. Supporting material may be data, a personal example, or an expert opinion. Each of these warrants persuade different kinds of audiences. Knowing the person or audience you are trying to persuade helps you craft the best argument. The warrant is the most important part of the argument; it provides the reason why you are right or why the person should change their mind.

As long as you keep these fundamentals in mind, the next time you get into an argument can be a conversation rather than a screaming match. You can have a conversation and, at the end, someone agrees with the other person. This kind of conversation is preferable to the screaming match as it leaves both sides satisfied they have made the right choice. It avoids leaving people angry about the situation.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

An article providing several strategies to handle group conflict
- Link to resource: https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTMM_79.htm

An article providing strategies for building consensus in a group
- Link to resource: https://www.leadstrat.com/blog/the-art-of-getting-to-yes-5-techniques-for-building-consensus-2/

An article providing tips on how to resolve problems in groups at work
- Link to resource: https://www.mediate.com/articles/thicks.cfm

Lesson Glossary

interpersonal tension: conflict between two or more people in a group
consensus: general agreement by a majority of a group’s members on a decision
data: facts or statistics backed by research
claim: the argument you are making
argument: an exchange of ideas with the intent of persuading someone to change their attitudes or behavior
warrant: supporting material that helps to prove your point
Check Your Knowledge

1. The first thing you should do when you encounter a problem is take it to the highest person on the chain of command that you can.
   a. True
   b. False
2. Open communication is a great way to calm interpersonal tensions.
   a. True
   b. False
3. Consensus is never something a group should try to obtain.
   a. True
   b. False

Answer Key:

Citations

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