

Rather than eliminating relationship conflict, teams can learn how to withstand it, gaining a deeper understanding of business issues and of each other.

# TOO HOT TO HANDLE? HOW TO MANAGE RELATIONSHIP CONFLICT

By  
**Amy Edmondson** and  
**Diana McLain Smith**

**MOST PEOPLE WOULD AGREE** that teamwork at the senior level of an organization promotes better decision making. At the same time, considerable research and anecdotal evidence suggests that senior teams often find teamwork difficult. The competing viewpoints that promote sound decision making can also lead to conflicts that waste precious time and erode interpersonal relationships. Indeed, when substantial conflicts erupt, dysfunctional group dynamics followed by frustration and flawed decisions may be the rule, rather than the exception.

Prior work has advised management teams facing conflict to focus on the substance – the ‘task at hand’ – and to steer clear of relationship issues. Task conflict, it argues, can be resolved by recourse to facts and logic, whereas relationship conflict turns into unproductive personal attacks and emotional confrontations. Task conflict is conceptualized as ‘differences in opinion relating to work or business decisions,’ while relationship conflict pertains to ‘personality differences and interpersonal tensions.’ Researchers propose that teams engaging in frequent task conflict will perform

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well, while teams caught up in relationship conflict will suffer.

This advice makes sense under three conditions. First, task conflict must not trigger opposing values, interests, or belief systems in the team. For example, if some executives believe that 'good design sells products' while others believe that 'customers are primarily motivated by price,' a conflict that pits design against price triggers these opposing beliefs. The second condition is met if careful analysis of facts – such as financial data or engineering tests – can reduce or eliminate key uncertainties that support different options. Third, the stakes should be low or only moderately high.

Issues that meet these three conditions qualify as what we call 'cool topics': they can be addressed by debating the facts, with little risk of giving rise to heated disagreement. In these cases, especially when leaders emphasize shared goals and good communication, teams can usually process conflicts effectively. In contrast, 'hot topics' call for a different approach.

Hot topics in management teams are those for which differing (usually taken-for-granted) values, belief systems, or interests shape individuals' points of view; relevant uncertainties surrounding the topic or decision cannot be reduced by a review of the available facts; and the stakes are high. Under these conditions, relationship conflict has an annoying habit of showing up uninvited, despite managers' best efforts to avoid it. This is because of the way the human mind works. Behavioural research has shown that people spontaneously attribute unflattering motives, traits, or abilities to those who disagree – and persist in disagreeing – with our strongly-held views. One's own views seem so 'right' that others' disagreement seems downright disagreeable – and intentionally so.

Two cognitive mechanisms identified by psychologist **Lee Ross** and his colleagues help to explain why this happens. First, people tend to see their own views as more common than they actually are, leading them to (falsely) assume that others share their views – the 'false consensus effect.' This assumption creates problems when they are unexpectedly refuted, as in the course of a disagreement. Unfortunately, this is usually an unpleasant-rather-than-pleasant surprise, due to a second mechanism, 'naïve realism' – a person's "unshakable conviction that he or she is somehow privy to an invariant, knowable, objective reality – a reality that others will also perceive faithfully, provided that they are reasonable and

rational." So, when others misperceive that 'reality,' we conclude that it must be because they view the world "through a prism of self-interest, ideological bias, or personal perversity." When these well-documented cognitive tendencies get applied to the problem of discussing a conflict on a hot topic, major challenges often ensue.

When heated debates trigger relationship conflict, individual managers usually consider two alternatives, each of them unattractive: silence one's views to preserve relationships and make progress; or voice them, risking emotionally-charged discussions that erode relationships and harm progress. Our research, building on **Chris Argyris** and **Donald Schön's** pioneering work in organizational learning, suggests that neither choice produces effective team discussions. First, silencing is often ineffective. The negative emotional reactions embedded in people's attributions typically leak out through tones of voice or veiled criticisms, distorting the substantive conversation and intensifying relationship tensions. Second, although relationship conflict is usually handled poorly, we have found that it is possible to learn how to handle it well.

### When Conflict Gets Personal

Even when they start out with the best of intentions, managers seeking to exploit the advantages of teamwork often encounter conflicts that derail collaboration. Consider a conflict that broke out at 'Elite Systems,' a manufacturer of high-end office equipment for home and business markets.

Eight senior managers, including the CEO, gathered in a series of meetings to rethink their strategy in the face of the firm's deteriorating financial performance. At one session, two executives almost came to blows: Ian McAlister, the head of Elite's struggling core business, and Frank Adams, the president of a small, successful subsidiary with less-expensive product lines. Adams opened the discussion.

"We face a fundamental problem," he announced, looking directly at McAlister. "For three years, we've sunk an enormous amount of money into turning around your [Elite's core] business, but the dropping revenues show it's not working. I'm worried we're sinking more and more money into a business with no clear strategy for approaching today's market. My research shows that growth is clearly at the low end of the market – which is why our subsidiary

had such a tremendous year and why your business is doing nothing but losing ground.”

As the rest of the group held its collective breath, McAlister turned to face Adams. “From your point of view, maybe,” he said. “But with the same information, I would go in a very different direction. I know we can’t sell the same way to our core segment as we have in the past. I know we’ve got to do something different. But, we can grow if our products are attractive. We don’t need the market to grow for us to grow. Besides, a year ago, we made a conscious choice to invest in the core business, and those investments haven’t paid off yet.”

With these two opening statements, Adams and McAlister set the terms of the debate. To Adams, the data unequivocally showed that the core business was in fundamental trouble; after all, the lower end of the market was growing. This was ‘obvious,’ but not to McAlister. He accepted Adams’s data, but rejected his conclusion. To McAlister, his view was equally obvious: you don’t need the market to grow. If your products are attractive enough, you can expand market share. Looking at the very same data, the two executives arrived at very different conclusions about how to deal with an uncertain future full of risk.

### Dynamics of Hot Topics

Our analysis has identified three patterns that occur when executive teams debate hot topics. First, people start to repeat the same points over and over again. For example, at Elite, Adams continued to argue in various ways that it wasn’t a good idea “to keep throwing money” at the core business. McAlister never disputed Adams’s facts, but he countered his conclusions at every turn – and always with some version of the same argument: “We invested heavily in this business because we thought our products were strong enough to sustain growth, and those recent investments haven’t paid off yet.” In a matter of minutes, they found themselves at an impasse where each manager’s only recourse was to repeat his position.

Second, as soon as a team reaches a substantive impasse, the discussion starts to ‘get personal.’ In the Elite case, interviews showed that Adams wondered privately, as did McAlister, why the other insisted on taking such obviously wrong-headed views and persisted in holding them despite ‘rational’ arguments that so obviously refuted them. In the meeting, they would speculate (privately) about each other’s motives, which led quickly to silent attributions about the other’s character or abilities (e.g., Is he closed-minded? Incompetent? Or just plain stupid?)

Whether blaming motives, character or abilities, each individual is silently blaming the other (or others) for the team’s impasse. Another well-documented cognitive tendency, the ‘fundamental attribution error,’ helps explain why. Lee Ross showed that people attribute others’ behaviour overwhelmingly to dispositional causes (those based on personality or motives), ignoring even powerful situational causes. This tendency can lead managers to attribute the behaviour they observe in others while discussing a hot topic – say, persistence or a frustrated tone of voice – to others’ motives or character rather than to the difficulties of the situation (say, the challenges involved in discussing a complex, high-stakes topic with people who hold different beliefs about it.) Our research also suggests that, in these situations, virtually no one entertains the possibility that their own behaviour may be one of the situational pressures contributing to the other’s behaviour.

Third, once a task conflict sparks negative interpersonal attributions, emotions take center stage and substantive progress slows to a standstill. At this point, people may openly blame failures on their colleagues. At Elite, Adams eventually threw up his hands and declared to the group in exasperation, “It sounds to me like Ian is trying to take certain decisions off the table!” At a loss for what to do, another manager cracked a joke and the group switched topics. Given these dynamics, it is easy to understand why managers would want to avoid relationship conflict. The problem is that it’s hard to do.

<b>Contrasting Cool and Hot Topics</b>		Figure 1
	Cool Topics	Hot Topics
<b>Data</b>	Accessible, relatively objective, conducive to testing of different interpretations	Controversial and/or inaccessible, interpretation is highly subjective, different interpretations hard to test
<b>Level of Certainty</b>	High*	Moderate to low
<b>Stakes</b>	Low to moderate	High
<b>Goals</b>	Largely shared	Differ based on deeply-held beliefs, values or interests
<b>Discussion</b>	Reasonable, fact-based, collegial	Often emotional, lack of agreement about which facts matter and what they mean, veiled personal attacks likely
*High certainty situations involve present actualities or near-term possibilities that can be illuminated relatively easily through facts and analyses.		

## Hot vs. Cool Systems

Figure 2

Hot System	Cool System
Emotional	Cognitive
'Go'	'Know'
Simple	Complex
Reflexive	Reflective
Fast	Slow
Develops Early	Develops Late
Accentuated by Stress	Attenuated by Stress
Stimulus Control	Self-Control

Source: J. Metcalfe and W. Mischel, "A Hot/Cool System of Delay of Gratification: Dynamics of Willpower," *Psychological Review*, 106/1 (1999)

### Hot vs. Cool Systems

When data are relatively accessible and straightforward, criteria and goals are largely shared, and differences don't run very deep, conflict is not difficult to resolve. In contrast, for hot topics, people may not agree which data are most relevant, and interpretation of the data can be highly subjective. Managers' subjective judgments are informed by their belief systems and are shaped by their past experiences, personal values, psychological needs and political interests.

As the conflict at Elite illustrates, when belief systems clash, conflicts resist resolution on the basis of facts and logic alone. McAlister differed with Adams's conclusions, not because he disputed his facts, but because he held different beliefs about the power of products, he valued design more than Adams did, he didn't want to go 'down market,' and his choice seemed to him obviously right. These were not matters of dispassionate fact that could be adjudicated to support shared goals: they were emotionally-charged considerations that mattered to the individuals involved and to the business.

Hot topics spark emotional reactions that make reasoned deliberation difficult. Once sparked, such reactions should be addressed, as they rarely go away by themselves. Psychological research sheds light on the underlying cognitive mechanisms. According to **Janet Metcalfe** and **Walter Mischel**, human beings process events through two distinct cognitive systems: a hot system and a cool system. While the former triggers us to respond to events emotionally and quickly ('to go'), the latter allows us to slow down and to think first ('to know'). The cool system is the basis for self-regulation and self-control.

In contrast, the hot system is emotional and impulsive, triggered by stimuli that lead to instant reactions rather than reflection and reason. When an event is processed through the hot system, it becomes difficult to think slowly and logically and avoid fast, reflexive conclusions about the task at hand or about those with opposing views.

### The Keys to Productive Behaviour

Management teams can learn a set of three practices to navigate conflicts productively. By building these skills, they can use both

task and relationship conflicts to gain a deeper understanding of business issues and of each other.

#### 1. Manage Self

This refers to the ability to examine and transform the thoughts and feelings that hijack one's ability to reason calmly when conflicts heat up. This entails *reflecting* on one's reactions and *reframing* the situation, thereby becoming less emotionally-triggered and more able to ask questions and consider alternative interpretations. The more we engage in these two activities, the more connections we make between our hot and cool systems, building our capability to deploy the cooling system under stress.

Once a conflict triggers an emotional reaction, reflecting can cool one's own emotions down by turning the automatic 'go' response into a more deliberate 'know' response. We are not referring to 'armchair reflection' that is divorced from action. Instead we mean 'reflecting-in-action,' as Schön coined the term. When they reflect-in-action, managers take notice of their own attributions and of the emotional reactions they spark, so as to view them in a more skeptical manner. In making this shift, managers neither ignore their feelings nor simply act on them; instead, they stop to examine them. From this reflective standpoint, feelings lose their tight grip on cognition.

By virtue of our different beliefs, we will each see things the other misses. It is our responsibility to discuss our different views so that each of us can learn what we might be missing. Reflecting and reframing can be extremely difficult when one's hot system is engaged. This is a time where the rest of the team can play a key role: those who are not directly embroiled in a debate have easier access to their cool systems, and hence can help others reflect and reframe when they are unable to do so.

#### 2. Manage Conversations

The second practice channels managers' reframed reactions into better conversations, ones in which emotionally-charged or divisive topics can be harnessed to make better decisions and strengthen relationships. Over time, such better-managed conversations build a team's collective cooling system, because teams see that by reflecting aloud on task and relationship issues, they can cool things down without stifling dissent or accumulating what Argyris has called 'undiscussables.'

When we first encountered Elite's top management team, they had so many 'undiscussables' that executives rarely said anything of importance for fear of setting off a relationship conflict like the one between Adams and McAlister. Bemused by their dull meetings and long silences, the co-author of this article (who had just started working with them) asked the team, partly in jest: "How many undiscussables would this team discuss if this team could discuss undiscussables?"

Everyone laughed – until they realized that she actually wanted an answer, at which point they fell silent. Breaking the silence after an awkward pause, one executive finally suggested a topic, then another did, and then another, until they had generated a list that included things like "how we'll grow," "where we'll compete," and "how we'll reduce costs." Nothing about the topics themselves

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made them undiscussable: they were undiscussable because the group knew that each one had the potential to trigger interpersonal conflict, leaving people feeling that they had to either take sides or remain silent.

At the same time, everyone recognized that their future success depended on their ability to deal with these topics directly and effectively. For this reason, they asked for help from two external experts in addressing the strategic issues underlying the firm's performance. Over the course of nine months, the team learned how to keep their conflicts in a cooler zone by managing conversations in three specific ways:

1. Exploring their different beliefs (allowing them to see or consider new possibilities);
2. Acknowledging emotional reactions openly and exploring what led to them; and
3. Identifying substantive conflicts as well as relationship conflicts and discussing both as needed.

### 3. Manage Relationships

We have tried to help teams accelerate the relationship-building process by working in three areas: building grounded trust (not blind trust); investing in particular relationships (those critical to the success of the firm by virtue of spanning key areas of interdependence); and developing members' ability to observe, map, and alter patterns of interactions that make relationship conflicts too hot to handle.

Managers who take the time to get to know each other as people and to understand each others' goals and concerns are less likely to speculate negatively about each other's motives and more likely to ask one another about their concerns. This is how to build trust that is grounded in experience. Productive discussion of relationship conflicts requires explicit recognition (aloud) that people see things differently, that each view has strengths and weaknesses, and each manager has legitimate interests and concerns. Trust allows the team members to recognize that, even though no one is perfect, everyone is trying to do their best to work through the issues at hand.

#### In closing

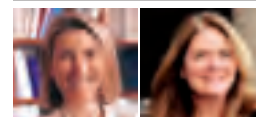
While the practices we describe can be learned, many teams find them challenging to put into practice for three reasons. First, in

many organizations, acknowledging emotions – let alone digging into them – is simply not done. Second, the kind of public reflection depicted here is by no means the norm in the executive suite. Third, the level of self-disclosure required is unlikely to exist without some initial foundation of 'psychological safety' in a team, a level that rarely exists at the outset.

Some teams we have studied have tried to stamp out relationship conflict by redrawing organizational charts, redefining roles, or firing problematic managers. Although these efforts succeeded in separating people who did not get along, they did not build the firms' cooling systems, thereby limiting its ability to make sound decisions quickly when faced with hot topics.

Over time, this limitation slowed the growth of their people and their business in much the same way stamping out forest fires slowed the growth of Sequoia forests: until recently, under the mistaken assumption that all fires were uniformly destructive, forest rangers made an all-out effort to put out all fires whenever and wherever they occurred. The result? The forests stopped growing. Only in the last decade did they realize that the towering Sequoia trees actually needed fire to disperse the seeds in their pinecones. What's more, rangers didn't know that the trees had developed a built-in defense system that allowed them to withstand fires – that is, as long as they didn't get too hot. Unfortunately, by extinguishing every fire, the rangers unwittingly allowed the underbrush to flourish, fueling the fires that broke out and making them hotter than they otherwise would be. The net result was that the rangers' firefighting efforts were actually harming, not preserving, the forest's growth.

Just as forest rangers have learned the vital role fire plays in the growth of Sequoia forests, so have some executives learned the vital role that relationship conflict can play in accelerating the growth of their people and their business. Rather than eliminating it, teams can work to learn practices that allow them to withstand such conflict; and like the trees in the Sequoia forests, these teams will encounter little that is too hot to handle. **R**



**Amy Edmondson** is the Novartis Professor of Leadership and Management and chair of doctoral programs at Harvard Business School. **Diana McLain Smith** is a partner at Monitor Company focusing on team and organizational performance. She is the author of *Divide Or Conquer: How Great Teams Turn Conflict into Strength* (Portfolio, 2008).