



W3 2017 Conference

Solving the Conflict Puzzle

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Toughest Conflicts?

- ▶ As managers, what makes some workplace conflicts particularly **difficult to resolve**?
 - ▶ *Certain issues?*
 - ▶ *Certain people?*
 - ▶ *Certain relationships?*
 - ▶ *Certain situations?*



Agenda

- ▶ **The tightrope:**
Functional and dysfunctional conflict
- ▶ **Three challenges:**
 - ▶ The flight instinct
Fleeing the scene
 - ▶ The temptation to fight
Escalating confrontation
 - ▶ One-sidedness (and power!):
The other party won't problem-solve



Conflict Is Managerial Work

- ▶ **How much time do managers spend handling employee disputes and other conflicts?**
 - ▶ Estimates: 13-25%
(Robert Half International, 2011; Thomas & Schmidt, 1976; Johnson & Indvik, 2001)
 - ▶ May underestimate — misses all the quiet conflict management involved in “managing upward”!
 - ▶ Our focus: Not about doing it *less* — just doing it better.



Forms of Conflict



Task	Relationship
Conflict over the right way of doing work	Personality clashes
Disagreements over ideas	Emotional conflict
Different opinions about the task	Personal friction
Differing interpretations of data	Tension between individuals



“Constructive Conflict”



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

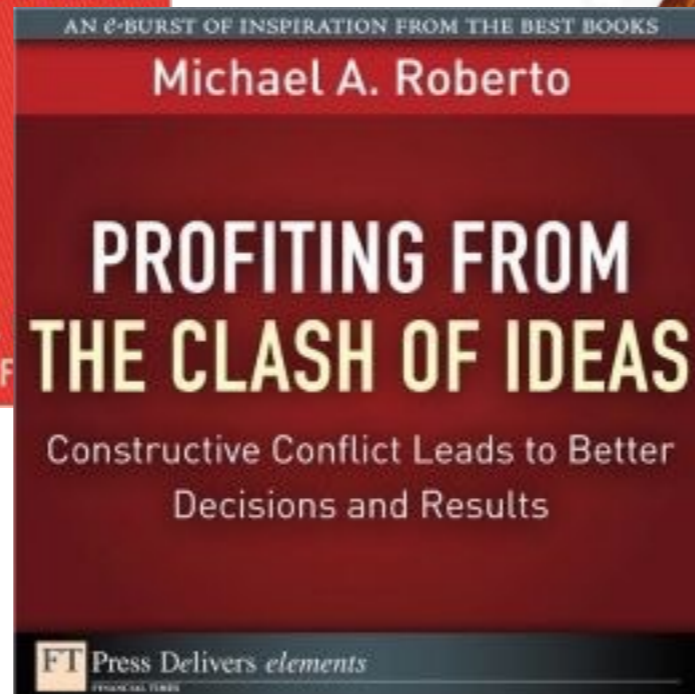
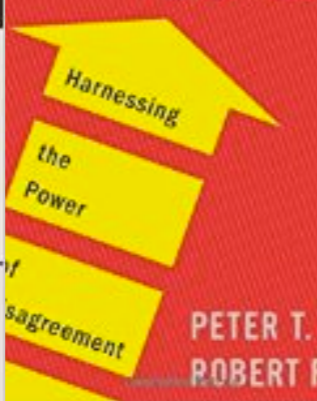
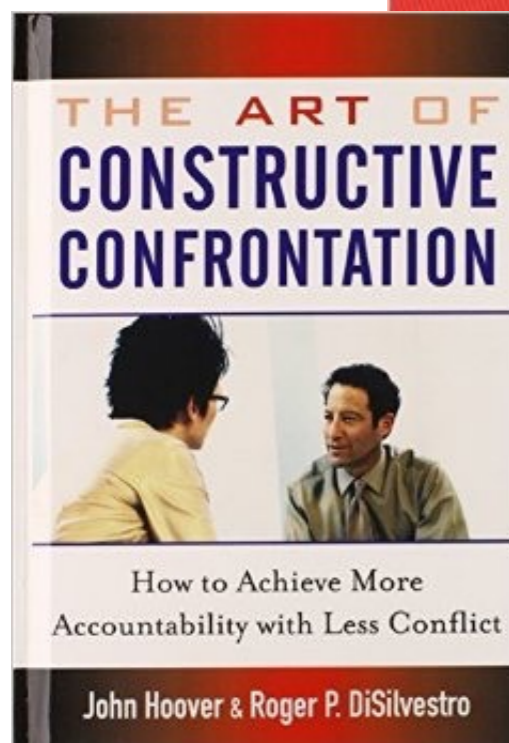
HOW MANAGEMENT TEAMS CAN HAVE A GOOD FIGHT

CRAIG E. RUNDE
and TIM A. FLANAGAN

BUILDING CONFLICT COMPETENT TEAMS

“...A comprehensive, thoroughly researched guide to the crucial and inevitable role conflict plays on a team.”
—Patrick Lencioni, author of *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*

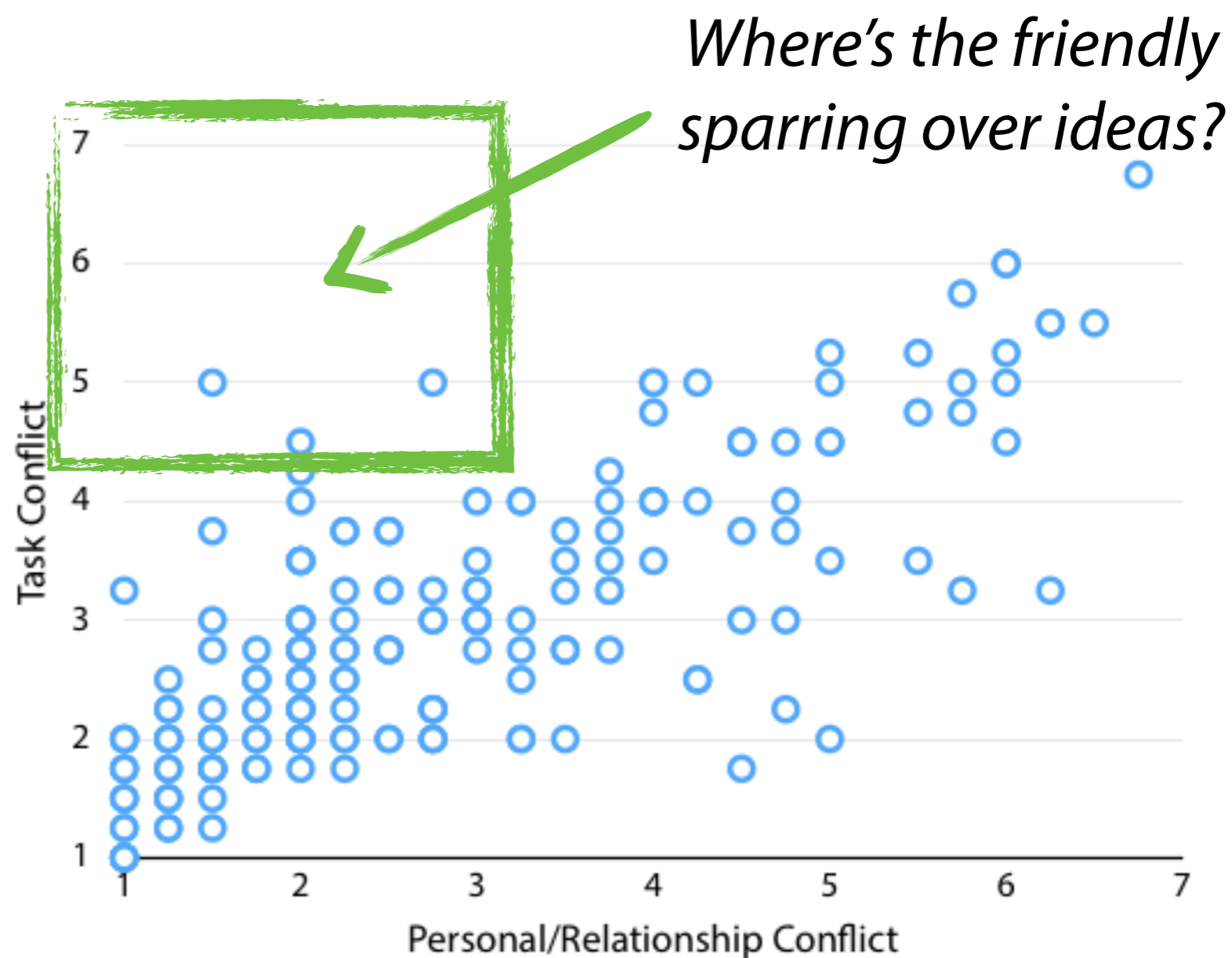
THE CENTER FOR CREATIVE LEADERSHIP



by Steven M. Eisenhardt, Jean L. Kahwajy, and L.J.

But...

- ▶ Our data from a Canadian organization:



The Research

- ▶ Meta-analysis (“study of studies”) summarizing decades of studies (1000s of employees; 100s of teams)
(De Dreu & Weingart, 2003)
- ▶ **Task and relationship conflict strongly correlated**
- ▶ Task conflict also reduces satisfaction with the team and reduces team performance!



Why is it so common for professional disagreements to turn into personal conflicts?



Three Obstacles To Productive Conflict



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1. The Instinct to Hide



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The Instinct To Hide

- ▶ **We often want to...**
 - ▶ Keep others from being angry
 - ▶ Avoid being bogged down in others' emotions
 - ▶ Avoid feeling attacked or blamed
 - ▶ Keep conversations predictable, planned, 'scripted'
- ▶ **What are the consequences?**



Rare To Be Fair?

- ▶ *“The senior managers of the company admitted to me that they were tempted to avoid the rank and file – partly out of guilt and partly because they doubted whether they would be able to keep a cool enough head to practice process fairness.”*

(Brockner, 2006, describing managers at a telecommunications company handling layoffs)



Avoidance in Action...

How did you respond to seeing a colleague being treated rudely?

Confront constructively (e.g., "ask A to stop mistreating B")

Report (e.g., "talk with a supervisor about it")

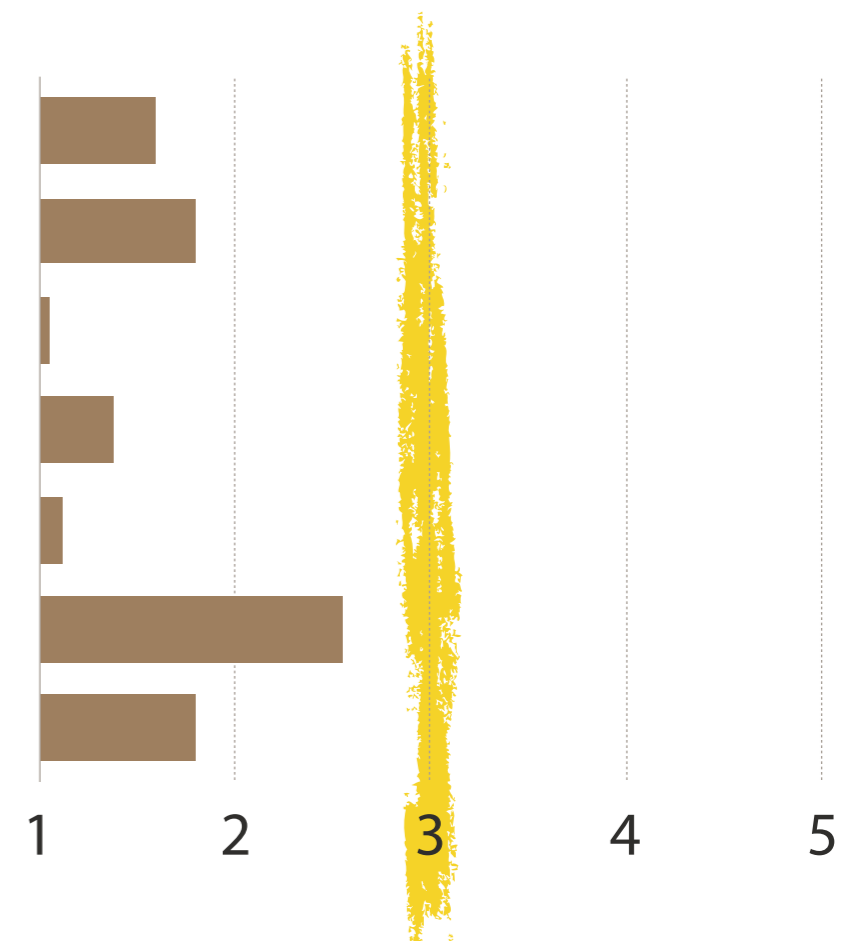
Revenge (e.g., "get even with A")

Ostracism (e.g., "refuse to talk to A")

Tit-for-Tat (e.g., "treat A the way he/she treated B")

Support Victim (e.g., "show B that I care")

Ignore/Downplay (e.g., "just try to forget it")



(Hershcovis, Neville, Reich, Christie, Cortina & Shan, 2017)

"Somewhat"



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Avoiding the Instinct to Hide

- ▶ **Anticipate.** Right or wrong, think about how you'd feel if you saw the situation the way they did.
- ▶ **Let 'em vent!** Encourage emotional release. Don't try to sidestep it. *"Have feelings, or your feelings will have you."*
- ▶ **Consider the cost of delay.** Ask yourself what will happen if you don't act — consider what it means for this conflict, and the next one.
- ▶ **Replenish.** Conflict is depleting work. Plan interactions to recover and reaffirm your strengths rather than ruminating.





2. The Temptation To Fight



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When Do Conflicts Heat Up?

- ▶ **When and how** do conflicts become personal, emotional, aggressive, or confrontational?



The Underlying Dynamics

- ▶ Conflicts are about **status**
What does your criticism say about my respect, standing, position, etc.?
- ▶ Conflicts are about **power**
How does your criticism change or challenge my authority, my duties, my control over others or others' control over me?



In Action...

- ▶ **Terry is inadvertently left off the email chain about a rescheduled meeting. He blows up angrily—and publicly—at the committee chair about the error.**
- ▶ *What might this imply about Terry's importance in the group?*
- ▶ *What does this do to Terry's control over his day and his work?*



Mind the Gap!

“Victims”

- Severe
- Controllable
- Intentional
- Deliberate
- Ongoing



“Transgressors”

- Mild
- Uncontrollable
- Unintentional
- Accidental
- In the past

(Feeney & Hill, 2006; Kearns & Fincham, 2004; Zechmeister & Romero, 2002)

The Danger

He's looking into it for me.

“I’ll need a bit of time to look into it.”

He's trying to stall and hoping I'll leave it.



What To Do?

- ▶ **What can we do to deal with the ‘hidden problem’ of status and power?**
- ▶ What do we do once we *recognize* the status and power dynamics involved?



Avoiding Escalation

- ▶ **Offer them easy ways out.** Can you help them save face? Is there a way to seek a resolution that doesn't require them to feel like they're losing status?
- ▶ **Build trust.** Teams with high trust can have a "good fight", sparring on issues without feeling attacked personally.
- ▶ **Be curious.** Can you tell the story from their perspective? How closely would your telling of the story match theirs?
- ▶ **Offer 'voice'.** Task conflict spills over to personal conflict when people feel they haven't had a chance to be heard.





3. I'm Trying, But They Aren't



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One-Sidedness

- ▶ Conflict resolution is not an individual sport!
- ▶ ... But often, the other side seems unwilling to take part in solving the problem.
- ▶ *“Every time I deal with this, I commit. I do my part to help resolve things. But [the other person], he never actually listens or takes it seriously, never does anything to change.”*



What To Do?

- ▶ **How can we deal with an uncooperative counterpart?**
- ▶ What can we do to bring stubborn people to the table?



What Brings People to the Table?

- ▶ **Creating urgency.** How do you understand what's making *their* life unpleasant, and make conflict resolution about solving their problems as well as your own?
- ▶ **Asking real questions.** Can you understand the source of their resistance by asking genuine questions? (*Not "cross-examination" questions!*)
- ▶ **Involve their allies.** Who else has influence and can help bring them to the table? Look for 'brokers' who benefit when both parties can work together.



Self-Appraisal

- ▶ Consider your own conflicts, large and small:
 - ▶ How do you **get in front of 'covert' and potential conflict situations?**
 - ▶ How do you **anticipate and manage the emotional content?**
 - ▶ How do you **spot the power and status questions** under the surface?
 - ▶ How do you **bring in peers and even "manage upwards"** to get the right actors committed to solving the problem?



Thanks!

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