CHAPTER 7

Managing Conflict

7.1 INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 2, Librarians in the Workplace, we touched on the concept of conflict in the workplace, and on some of the factors that can cause that conflict. Many of these factors—working style preference, tolerance for change, feelings about work − life balance—are similar within a generational cohort, but vary broadly across the generations. Much has been written about generational differences, and within that large volume of literature there are differences in the assignments of names to those generations and in the birth years that fall into each of the generations. In today's workforce, we see participation from four or five generations, depending on the model we are following: Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Gen X, and Gen Y/the Millennials. Some opinions hold that Gen Y and the Millennials are two separate generations; however, the majority treat these as two names given to the same group. What are the differences in how these generational groups view the world of work that might cause conflict?

7.2 THE VETERANS

The Traditionalists are the oldest in the group of generations to be given a name, and include those who were born before 1945. This generation no longer has broad representation in the workforce, but of those that are still working, many hold upper-level management and other influential positions. Many Traditionalists fought for their country in one or multiple wars, and they are steeped in national pride and loyalty to God and country. Many lived through the Great Depression, instilling in them respect for frugality and saving, and disdain for wastefulness and indulgence. This generation values hard work, consistency, structure, and clear rules. Lancaster and Stillman (2002) observed that "the management style of many Traditionalists is still modeled on the military chain of command... [they] understand that leaders need to lead and troops need to follow" (pp. 19 − 20). Even though they share many values in

common with the Baby Boomers, it was difficult for the Traditionalists to welcome these newcomers who were eager to move quickly into management positions. Conflicts can arise between this generation and the Gen Xers and Millennials over matters of meeting etiquette (questioning or disagreeing may be discouraged) and project planning (each step should be followed and changed only with permission from the boss).

7.3 THE LOYALISTS

The Baby Boomer generation is considered to consist of those born somewhere between 1945 and 1964. This generation grew up post–World War II, many have close relations who fought in WWII, Korea, or Vietnam (or may have themselves), and came of age in the heat of the Cold War. Baby Boomers tend to identify strongly with their work, and feel significant loyalty to their employers. They were raised thinking it was natural to work for the same company for their entire lives, so they take the prospect of making that change very seriously. They were raised with the expectation that they would attain a level of success equal to or above what their parents achieved, so they will expect that their loyalty to their employer will be rewarded with good benefits, salary raises, and progressive promotion. Weidmer (2015) cautions that "Boomers strong work ethic and take-charge attitudes have pushed many to very responsible positions that they do not want to relinquish" (p. 53). These feelings can cause friction between Boomers and their younger generation colleagues who are keen to move into similar positions, particularly if these younger colleagues have moved quickly through the ranks and the Boomers do not see them as having diligently worked their way up. Similarly, members of the younger generations who are hired directly into upper-level positions may have a harder time gaining respect from and working closely with their Boomer colleagues and team members (we discuss this in more detail in Chapter 9: Mature Manager/Young Manager).

7.4 THE LATCH-KEY KIDS

The Gen X group were born sometime between 1965 and 1980, and thus will have had a very different experience growing up. They were raised to be independent, with a lot of freedom to make their own decisions—often the children of two working parents. Members of Gen X will be more inclined to question authority, and will want to have

a say in how they handle projects. This group does not feel the same loyalty to their employers as the Boomers do, and will feel comfortable asking for changes to working conditions or schedules, as well as changing jobs if these requests are not accommodated (Weidmer, 2015). They are comfortable with technology, but not wholly dedicated to it, as they witnessed the birth of the personal computer and the Internet, but did not grow up with either. Conflict can arise between Gen Xers and their older generation managers over the issues of control and decision-making. They do not work well under the old school "I plan, you execute" management style, and though they will seek to change this dynamic, if they are not successful they will often move on. Sometimes this moving on can take the shape of moving up into managerial positions, which may put them into the challenging position of having to work alongside the manager whose team they chose to leave.

7.5 THE DIGITAL NATIVES

The youngest generation currently in the working world is Gen Y, also known as the Millennial Generation, born sometime between 1981 and 1997. According to data from the Pew Research Center (Fry, 2016), as of earlier this year they surpassed the Boomers to become the largest living generation. Many in this group are too young to remember September 11th, but during their lives there has always been a war in the Middle East, and they have grown up with the threat of terrorism being front and center. This may explain their tendency to focus on the near term rather than the future, and to live for the enjoyment of today (Bencsik, Harvath-Csikos, & Jubasz, 2016). Millennials have also grown up surrounded by technology and a 24/7 flow of information, so they have a high comfort level with multitasking and blurring the boundaries between work time and leisure time. They have parents who were heavily involved in their lives, and thus tend to be less independent than Gen X, expecting frequent feedback and clear goals from their employers. Like Gen X, Millennials are comfortable with changing jobs and even striking out on their own. Their need for frequent and detailed guidance can create conflict with their Gen X managers, who will expect their team members to take minimal direction and work through projects without a lot of oversight. They may also come into conflict with their older generation managers over their desire for a flexible work schedule and their preference for working on bits and pieces of multiple projects instead of concentrating on one from start to finish.

7.6 STRATEGIES FOR A HEALTHY TEAM

All of these differing attitudes towards work and familiarity with technology can cause conflict among team members. Imagine that you have put together a team to work on a visioning project for future library spaces that might be put in place once funds are raised for the complete renovation of the building that houses the library. The team will be proposing design suggestions for spaces that are several years from being a reality. The far-future focus of the team's mandate may seem too abstract for the Millennial members, which can cause them to disengage from the work of the team. This will cause conflict with the other members of the team, as they may view this as laziness or failure to put in equal work. Conflict with Boomer members may be particularly sharp, as they will be heavily invested in a highly-polished end product that will receive kudos from those higher up in the organization. What are some strategies that managers can use to head off these conflicts before they happen?

In the beginning of this chapter (and in many parts of this book) we have enumerated the characteristic behaviors and preferences of the various generational groups. This is useful information to internalize as a manager, as it can help in predicting (and thereby planning for) some of the situations you may face with your team members. That being said, it is never a good idea to make blanket assumptions about people before getting to know them. It is entirely possible that you will have a Boomer team member who acts more like a Gen Xer, or a Millennial who fits right in with the Boomers. McKinlay and Williamson (2010) noted that they have observed these generational traits and differences in action throughout their careers as senior managers, but they also caution that:

> Individuals are just that—individuals. The qualities, characteristics or traits of one group of employees cannot be universally applied to all employees of that age group. We need to be able to recognise and value the differences of each group and each individual. (p. 201)

The first step in building a healthy team is to get to know the members and to encourage them to get to know each other. This will lay the groundwork for building trust within the team. Evans and Alire (2013) underscore the importance of trust, and call it "a key element in effective team environments" (p. 354). All the members of a team need not be homogenous or of one mindset to work well together. In fact, collegial and well-reasoned disagreements can lead to innovative projects and creative solutions to problems (more on this later in the chapter). Getting

comfortable with each other and growing accustomed to each other's viewpoints is important for building trust within a team. In researching trust in inter-organizational projects, Maurer (2010) observed that "trust needs time to develop; it is built incrementally through prior experiences … team members need to learn about each other's competence and interests to develop perceptions and expectations of future behaviour" (p. 631). Managers can also have a great deal of influence over the trust that exists within their team. Evans and Alire (2013) point out that three areas of trust must exist between you as the manager and your team: "your trust in the team, the team's trust in you, and the team members' trust in one another" (p. 354). Your team members should be comfortable in their knowledge of what to expect from you as they are with their fellow team members. In their discussion of trust building behaviors, Reina and Reina (2015) break this down into three dimensions: trust of character, trust of communication, and trust of capability. Table 7.1 outlines the practices that reinforce these dimensions and can be used by managers to foster trust in their teams.

The practice of acknowledging the skills and abilities of your team members can go a long way towards fostering a healthy working environment and bridging any generational divisions that may exist. Understanding the strengths that each member brings to the group, and ensuring that the other members recognize these strengths as well, will help to allay some of the preconceived fears about what people from certain age groups can and cannot handle. Some of these strengths will fall into the stereotypical categories (a Millennial who is a techno wiz), and

Table 7.1 Dimensions of trust and their reinforcing practices

Trust of character	Trust of communication	Trust of capability
• Manage expectations • Establish boundaries • Delegate appropriately • Keep agreements • Behave consistently	• Share information • Tell the truth • Admit mistakes • Maintain confidentiality • Give and take feedback	• Acknowledge others' skills and abilities • Express appreciation for work well done • Involve others in making decisions • Encourage learning

Source: Adapted from Reina, D. S., & Reina, M. L. (2015). *Trust and betrayal in the workplace: Building effective relationships in your organization* (3rd ed.). Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler.

some will surprise everyone, sometimes even the person who possesses that strength. Experienced managers learn to recognize, bring out, and develop strengths in their team members that might go undiscovered by the individuals themselves. Allowing and encouraging team members to develop new skills is also important. It has been well-documented in the literature of human resources development (as well as other areas) that providing training opportunities for employees increases job satisfaction and benefits both the employee and the organization (Schmidt, 2010). If you have a large enough team for which it is advantageous to break out into sub-teams for some projects, it can be beneficial to put team members from different generational groups together. If this is done with careful consideration of complementary skillsets and personalities, it will not only further the process of team members getting to know one another, but it will also help ease tensions that might exist due to preconceived notions about working with members of another generation. This can go a long way towards heading off intergenerational conflict within a team.

7.7 WORKING THROUGH ISSUES WHEN THEY ARISE

A team built on mutual trust and appreciation among members of their individual strengths will inherently be healthier and more productive. If you are working towards building a healthy team or even if you have succeeded, conflicts will likely arise at some point. Knowing this and being prepared for it will help you work through these situations with minimal damage to the team dynamic. For some managers, the natural instinct to jump in and resolve any issue that comes up within their team is hard to resist. Unless the situation is dangerously contentious, it should be avoided. Evans and Alire (2013) discuss the importance of empowering your team, in other words building a shared responsibility around the work the team does and its outcomes. An important piece of this empowerment is letting the team members resolve their own conflicts. Even if the team members ask you to intervene, dig deeper to find out what they have tried, and if you think there are other methods they could use without your intervention, encourage them to try again. This may be a tough sell at first, but once they experience the satisfaction of resolving differences themselves, they will be more willing the next time and the resolution will happen more organically. "When a team works through a conflict on its own, it tends to create a stronger team" (Evans & Alire, 2013, p. 353).

If you do need to intervene in your team's conflict (or if you are advising them on resolving it themselves) an important first step is to get to the root of the problem. It may be simple or it may be complex, but until the true cause of the conflict is uncovered it will not truly be resolved. Many problems boil down to either miscommunication or a lack of communication. This is not just a problem that occurs between the generations, it happens to everyone. That being said, there are some communication issues that can be amplified when they involve people from different generational groups. One example is clarity. In intergenerational team communication, it is important to consider the audience—be careful with word choice, and avoid using expressions that may mean different things to different people. The seemingly simple statement "let's agree to finish this ASAP" may gain agreement from everyone, but it may not mean the same thing to everyone. The Boomer team member may understand this to mean "let's work around the clock until this is finished", whereas the Millennial may interpret it as "let's finish this as soon as we can, taking into consideration all of our other commitments". If this message is not clarified, these two team members will likely come into conflict. Another potential conflict area for intergenerational teams is misunderstanding due to generational differences in communication preference. Hammill (2005) provides the following example of this in imagining a four-generation team:

> The Veterans on the team are looking for handwritten notes and direct, specific requests for work to be done. The Boomers do not like to work independently, and they expect to have meetings any time, any place—and it is fine if they are called day or night. Xers do not want to hear about the project outside of work, and don't dare call them at home. And the Yers don't want any meetings at all, they only communicate via voice mail and e-mail. (para. 20)

This example is extreme, but it illustrates these cross-generational differences. If your team is exhibiting signs of conflict over productivity issues that seem out of character for the team members involved, ask some probing questions about how they are working together. You may discover that misalignment of communication preference is at the root of the conflict.

In addition to the conflicts you can boil down to something fairly simple like miscommunication, you may also encounter complex conflicts that require multiple interventions. Is there a way to bring the generations together that will help to head off these conflicts before they start? One of the strategies being used for successfully managing multiple generations

is cross-generational mentoring. These programs are gaining popularity as a way to promote understanding and mutual respect among co-workers from different generations. Knight (2014) writes that: "[r]everse or reciprocal mentoring programs, which pair younger workers with seasoned executives to work on specific business objectives usually involving technology, are increasingly prevalent in many offices" (p. 3). In support of establishing programs in which Boomers act as mentors for their younger colleagues, Lindenberger (2016) explains how this practice can benefit the organization as well as the employees:

> [B]aby boomers retire, they take with them volumes of experience and information. Good working relationships between older and younger generations are critical in ensuring that this institutional knowledge is not lost as mature workers retire. The greater the mix of generations in an organization's workforce, the more important knowledge transfer becomes and the more powerful intergenerational synergy can be. (para. 26)

Lindenberger (2016) cautions that as valuable as these programs can be, they require a large commitment of time from the mentors, so it may be difficult to recruit volunteers. She stresses that it is incredibly important for there to be visible support for these programs from upper-level management. This is something to keep in mind if you decide to try implementing a program of this type in your organization. Put out feelers for potential mentors to ensure that you will have sufficient uptake to get the program started. Once you have found your mentor base, propose the program to your administration and get them on board, recruiting them as mentors if possible. A program with many false starts and roadblocks will frustrate participants and limit interest. A well-thought-out and supported program will have much greater chances of success and longevity.

7.8 CONFLICT AS A MOTIVATOR

So far in the chapter, we have discussed conflict in a negative context, as something to be avoided. Is it possible for the opposite to be true—can conflict have a positive role for teams? The answer, perhaps surprisingly, is yes, but there is a caveat. It is a routine occurrence for members of a team to have differing opinions on the best way forward for a project, the best way to implement a new procedure or workflow, as well as many other decisions that need to be made by the group. Often these situations will be worked out through reasoned discussion and examination of the pros and cons of each proposal, with the most logical gaining group consensus. The discussions may be long, and the advocates for each proposal may come in

with complete confidence that theirs is the best option, into which they have put a lot of thought and a detailed explanation for the team, but in the end, the whole team will be on board with the final decision. This is referred to as "cognitive conflict". If the reasoned discussion process gets derailed by one or more team members who are so invested in their own ideas that they refuse to listen to the other proposals, it will result in what we traditionally think of as conflict, also referred to as "emotional conflict". Evans and Alire (2013) note the following about the two types of conflict in teams: "Conflict in and of itself, is not the problem. It can be beneficial when it is cognitive rather than emotional in character. The challenge is to achieve the highest possible level of cognitive conflict and the lowest level of emotional conflict" (p. 168). They caution that teams in which there is no cognitive conflict may be moving through the decision process too quickly. Team members who have dissenting opinions may be keeping quiet in the interest of getting to the end of the project, or because they will anger their colleagues. This can be a problem in organizations where librarians go through the tenure process—pre-tenure individuals may hesitate to disagree with their tenured colleagues. As a manager, it is important to be mindful of your team's progress on projects—ensuring that they are not rushing their decisions—in the same manner as you would if the project had stalled. When you have your routine one-on-one discussions with your team members, check in with them on their feelings about team processes and the openness of group discussions. You may find that they need some coaching on ways to make their opinions heard without ruffling the feathers of their colleagues. You may find you can step into this role yourself, or there may be an optimal team member or colleague outside the team to take this on (cross-generational mentoring could work well here).

Thinking about how conflict is an important part of working as a team and about the potential for cross-generational mentoring to help younger librarians develop team communication strategies brings to mind another positive aspect of conflict. Experiencing conflict, particularly in situations such as team project discussions where no one's livelihood is at stake, is an important part of personal and occupational growth. Is there a strategy that managers can recommend to their team members to help them learn from conflict? Marsick, Weaver, and Yorks (2014) advise that an important step in learning from conflict is to apply critical reflection:

It is not easy to engage in critical reflection during a conflict or in the midst of a longstanding interpersonal problem, although it can be done with practice. Critical reflection demands an open mind and heart, including the willingness to

*slow things down (to push the reflexive "pause button"), to question one's inter-
pretations of the situation and the other person (or people) involved, to listen
carefully with a suspension of blame, as well as to probe for alternative view-
points. Critical reflection is more easily carried out before or after the fact, when
emotions and feeling can be examined and understood, and with time to learn
new skills in order to change one's customary response patterns. (p. 560)*

Team members can be encouraged to think about any assumptions
that they held going into the situation where the conflict occurred that
may have influenced their actions, to analyze these assumptions, and to
attempt to transform them by openly listening to other viewpoints. Using
this strategy can help to parse the underlying sources for the conflict, as
well as think analytically about how the situation might have evolved dif-
ferently if other approaches had been used. If you can encourage your
team members to engage in this practice should they come into conflict
with one another, they will not only work more effectively together, but
they will also find that they are better equipped to negotiate difficult
situations in all parts of their professional lives.

7.9 CONCLUSION

There are numerous differences among the generational groups that will
affect areas such as working style preferences and management style.
These differences can be the direct cause of conflict in the workplace,
and they can exacerbate conflicts that stem from other causes. Managers
who are leading intergenerational teams can use a variety of strategies to
help promote healthy relationships among team members, and between
themselves and their team. Trust is a crucial element and is the base upon
which other strategies such as recognizing each member's individual
strengths and finding complementary cross-generational pairings can be
built. When conflicts do arise, team members should be given some lati-
tude to figure out a solution for themselves without intervention from
their manager. Finding the real root cause is an important step in this
process—many conflicts can be traced back to a miscommunication or a
lack of communication. Cross-generational mentoring, though time-
consuming, is a strategy that helps in finding common ground and
improving communication. Finally, if conflict is of the right type and
handled in the right way, it can be a motivating factor and something that
contributes to the health of the team.

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