# Cases for Small-Group Discussion

# Case 12–1. Conflict and Technology

# Janna White sat in her office, perplexed. Two days previously, she had been given responsibility to lead a team on a project that would have a significant impact on the investment decision under consideration at PlexiWarm Corporation. The decision involved an expansion of the firm’s product lines to include high-density spray foam insulation (the firm currently produces rigid foam insulation panels). Janna had scheduled the first team meeting for this afternoon and was looking forward to working on such a significant project.

# She had just opened her e-mail to find a stream of confusing communications from two team members. Apparently, the two had been exchanging e-mail and text messages in such rapid succession that the replies had become very disjointed. The final messages had come about an hour earlier; both parties had basically concluded that they simply could not work together because of the poor communication of the other person!

# Janna had the record only of the e-mail messages—the text messages had been sent between the communicants’ cell phones. Without a complete record of the communication, Janna did not have a clue how to try to resolve the conflict. She e-mailed each person, asking whether they had kept a record of the “text thread.” She quickly got responses that neither had kept the stream of messages and that each now refused to work with the other.

# Case 12-1 Questions

# *What could Janna have done in advance to try to prevent the conflict?*

This case demonstrates the importance of face-to-face interpersonal communication for good working relationships. Using technology exclusively tempts participants to flame each other and use language that is more extreme than would be used in person. Janna should make every effort to have her team members meet regularly so they can develop a trusting, respectful relationship.

# *Now that the conflict has occurred, and since this significant project still must be carried out, how should Janna manage the conflict?*

Of the five conflict management strategies described in the chapter, forcing, avoiding, and accommodating would fail in this situation. Janna needs to try problem solving, asking her team members to collaborate in order to reach consensus, especially because the upcoming project is so crucial. Depending on the source of the conflict, compromising would be a fallback strategy.

# *Looking ahead, what is the likely effect of the conflict on team productivity?*

# Cooperation among the team members is unlikely on this critical new project unless their conflict is managed properly. The problem between the two team members, if ignored, might even be contagious, causing the other members to take sides. The result of this worst-case scenario is total dysfunction and loss of business.

# Case 12-2. Conflict over Job Duties

Linda Sims is the manager of the accounting department and Jose Martinez is the manager of the sales department for a production company. This is a fast-growing company, and the staff of the accounting department (11 employees) is often overwhelmed with work.

Since the accounting department is located immediately next to the credit department, Ruth Rankin, the administrative assistant in credit, sometimes works on journal entries assigned to her by Sims.

The company has experienced especially rapid growth over the past six months, which has caused everyone to be busier than usual. With the increase in sales volume, the credit office is under pressure to process applications more quickly, and Rankin is available to help Sims out with accounting overflow less often.

Sims complains to Martinez that she needs Rankin to work in accounting more than he needs her in credit. Martinez's response is, "If I can't move the credit applications through the pipeline in a timely manner, soon there'll be no need for an accounting department, because this company will be out of business."

###### **Case 12-2 Questions**

1. *What is the cause of this conflict?*

The cause is allocational interdependence. Martinez and Sims are competing for Rankin’s labor.

1. *Write a problem statement for this situation*.

All of the required amount of work is not being completed.

1. *If you were Sims, how would you approach Martinez in this situation?*

Martinez should understand that certain accounting tasks are essential and that Rankin's help is equally important in both departments. He could be asked for suggestions.

1. *What style did Sims initially use?*

Sims initially attempted to manage the conflict by forcing the situation. She merely laid down the law to Martinez—“This is the way it’s going to be.”

1. *What could Sims do to gain Martinez's cooperation rather than make him defensive?*

To come to some kind of agreement, Sims could select the problem-solving conflict management strategy. In this way, these opposing points of view could be weighed against the facts. Since both Sims and Martinez have equal power and authority in the organization, and both department's functions are essential, collaboration is the key.

# Case 12-3. Conflict between the Team Members

Rod Edwards, the advertising manager for Waterlite Advertising and Associates, has two assistants. One is Gina Reese, an account executive who gets clients for the company. Edwards’s second assistant is Mina Patel, a copywriter. She does the actual writing and designing of the ads for the clients.

Reese and Patel usually have a close working relationship because they work as a team on all clients’ accounts. Reese gets the clients and discusses their needs with them. Afterward, she tells Patel about the conversation and the clients’ needs so Patel can design the right ad. Once Patel finishes the ad, Reese presents it to the client. If the ad is a success, it is usually Reese who gets the praise and recognition because she is the one who interfaces with the client.

In the past, Patel was not bothered by the recognition Reese got because she always knew she was the one who designed the ad. But the last ad Patel designed brought in a $1 million contract to the firm. Edwards immediately gave Reese a raise for bringing in the client but did not give Patel any recognition.

Naturally, this caused friction between Reese and Patel, and their relationship began to deteriorate. Four days after Reese got the raise, their conflict reached a climax. Reese borrowed Patel’s stapler (a trivial occurrence) and forgot to return it. Patel caused a scene and refused to talk to Reese for the next few days.

The problem was brought to Edwards’s attention because his department's productivity was declining. For the ads to be developed, the assistants had to work as a team.

Edwards called both employees into his office and immediately started lecturing them. He insisted they get along and begin working on the next ad. He told them he expected an ad finished by noon the following day. Reese and Patel walked out of Edwards’s office without resolving the problem. They did get some work done the next day, but their close relationship was never resumed.

# Case 12-3 Questions

1. *What kind of conflict resolution strategy did Edwards use? What kind should he have used?*

Edwards forced the situation. He should have tried problem solving.

1. *This is an example of destructive conflict. Could it develop as a constructive situation?*

Yes, Edwards could optimize the conflict. It may lead to more customers, better ads produced, and greater compatibility between worker.

1. *What steps should Edwards have followed to develop a win-win strategy?*

Edwards should have first been aware of the key communication principles called for. Then he should have

1. reviewed and adjusted the conflict conditions.
2. reviewed and adjusted the perceptions.
3. reviewed and adjusted the attitudes.
4. defined the problem.
5. initiated a joint search for alternatives.
6. evaluated the alternatives in light of criteria.
7. identified the best alternative.

**Small-Group Exercise**

*Divide the class into groups of five. Give them the following scenario. Ask them to reach consensus on the solution, using the Rational Problem**-Solving Process described in the chapter.*

**The Realty Tangle**

*Doris D. Phillips, University of Mississippi*

Kilgore and Mitchell, Realtors, is a Mississippi real estate firm that has been in business for 15 years and has a strong local and regional reputation. Partners James J. Kilgore and Donald O. Mitchell are assisted by six full-time salespeople, two part-time salespeople, and two full-time secretaries. Until recently they had enjoyed a harmonious office atmosphere.

Virginia Bolt has been with the firm in part-time sales for about five years and has built a reasonably large clientele. Before joining Kilgore and Mitchell she worked a total of 25 years in various clerical positions in banks and with governmental agencies. She had excellent clerical skills but was unable to remain long in any job because of an inability to get along with people.

Her recent actions indicate a renewal of the old “people problem.” In addition to antagonizing other salespeople in the firm by undercutting and backstabbing, she has allegedly violated an important point in realty ethics by advertising property in her own name with no reference to Kilgore and Mitchell as her employers.

Mitchell wants to release Virginia from her position with the firm. He believes that her unethical actions could damage the firm’s good name. He also thinks that her personality is disrupting an otherwise smooth operation.

Kilgore wishes to give Virginia another chance. His reasoning is that her successful record in sales outweighs her shortcomings in other areas.

***Task:*** In groups of five, use the Rational Problem Solving Process to make the management decision about Virginia’s future with the firm.