

Difference and challenge in teams



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1 The river basin and the bee colony

To introduce this course, before turning to workplace scenarios and reflecting on those, look at two metaphors drawn from nature: the river basin and the bee colony. We must not dwell on these metaphors – that would defeat our aim of giving practical guidance for teams – yet they are useful to bear in mind. They illustrate interesting aspects of team life: aspects that underlie the whole of the course.

1.1 The river basin

All water collected in a river basin eventually ends up in the same river. Downstream the river flows smoothly; there is a strong overall current, clearly moving in a certain direction. The pull of gravity and the lie of the land (influenced over time by the river itself) determine the path the river takes. Someone standing on the riverbank, watching this smooth-flowing mass of water, is like a customer, client or service-user, observing the graceful confidence of a highly effective team.

But beneath the surface of the river, the situation is very different. There are eddies and counter-currents, large obstacles and detritus that the water washes over and conceals. The overall effect may be one of inevitability but on a smaller scale this is not the case. Similarly, what those beyond the team see can be quite different from the experience of the team members. There are huge, overarching physical forces shaping the course of the river – pulling the water together.

Activity 1

What are the major 'forces' driving your team and its direction? Are you all, ultimately, travelling together?

Provide your answer...



Figure 1 Waterfalls draining into a smooth flowing section of river

To extend the metaphor a little further, think about what's happening upstream. Water is gathered across a large area, rivulets spring up in very different places and meander along; they do their own thing for a while before converging. Where they meet there can be turbulence. Upstream, there will be sections of white-water, rapids and waterfalls. As with teams, the downstream observer doesn't witness the upstream drama: the diverse rough inputs that produce a smooth output. Your team draws on very different people, used to acting in their own ways.

How much turbulence might we expect before a team is seen to be travelling together? In fluid dynamics, turbulence dissipates energy that might otherwise be put to good use. In teams, a degree of conflict on the journey together might – as you will see in this course – actually help.

1.2 The bee colony

Countless worker bees spread out from the hive in search of nectar. Different bees end up at different nectar sources, and on their return, perform intricate dances for their co-workers. The dances convey details of where to find abundant blooms. But how to decide on the best source, where the flowers are most full of nectar and where the colony should direct its efforts?

Due to their differing experiences in the field, workers have different suggestions for what is 'best' for the team: their perspectives are in conflict.



Figure 2 Bees transfer vital information about nectar sources through waggle dances

The more abundant a nectar source, the more vigorous the dance of the returned bee. So when a number of bees return excitedly from the same patch of flowers, there is more chance that the location will become a part of the 'social information' held by others in the colony. These bees out-compete the directions given by other bees dancing less vigorously. Some more recent studies of bee behaviour suggest that 'private information' held by individual bees (e.g. the memory of where they found nectar on a previous foraging trip) is also at play.

Guidance given by different team members is both challenging to and challenged by the experience and guidance given by others.

Despite such difference and challenge, it is clear that, in a stable bee colony, all effort is directed towards the same objective: the survival of that colony.

To spell out some learning from this metaphor: highly effective groups of collaborators can be full of challenge and difference.

To summarise the points we are emphasising through these two metaphors: **highly effective groups of collaborators – teams that seem to travel together – can be full of challenge and difference.**

2 'Meetings often descend into all-out war!'

Mandeep is a manager interested in developing a better team, as you will hear from the audio below (a transcript is also provided).

Audio content is not available in this format.



Activity 2

 (30 minutes)

Think back to a time of outright, heated, conflict at work – one you experienced directly or indirectly. Choose one of the people involved in the conflict (you, the person you were in conflict with, or another colleague).

- List five behaviours that person displayed (obvious behaviours of conflict might be shouting, banging the table etc., but try to think more widely, about body language, expression).
- List five words or phrases you recall might have been said as part of that heated conflict.

Five behaviours

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Five words or phrases

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Answer

Commentary: How easy was it to recall and reflect on this conflict? We imagine it made a strong emotional impression. Sometimes the memory of the emotion and stress caused lingers well beyond the memory of what the conflict was about. Energies are taken up coping with the stress of conflict. Within the behaviours and words you've listed, you might be able to differentiate between those that are acceptable in the workplace and those that are not.

Finally, did anything good come out of the conflict situation? How might that same good – or something even better – have been achieved with less stress and emotional upset? Looking back, what advice would you give to yourself/your colleagues on handling the situation?

Provide your answer...

Surely there must be *some* value in adversarial debate and the clash of ideas?

From where we are writing, in the UK, much of the political system seems grounded in conflict. Opposing parties 'attack' each other's positions, a shadow cabinet tracks the every move of government – keeping it in check and arguing vehemently for issues to be seen from an alternative perspective. In such systems, two (or more) teams are involved in the opposition – though we often hear that the same sort of conflict arises within the teams themselves. Political parties try to maintain a public image of complete harmony – yet if they are to lead and innovate, there has to be an opportunity to dissent from the current party line, and there has to be a way members can challenge themselves to dream up better, more relevant policies.

2.1 Encouraging healthy dialogue

Within the scenario of Mandeep's team, we find a vital question that all teams need to work out – how do we allow ourselves to challenge each other – to propose different ways of working and to test such proposals? How do we have a healthy dialogue, without it degenerating into adversarial conflict?

The analogy with politics interests us, because in many parts of the so-called 'democratic' world, groups are searching for a new kind of politics; a way to make politics more inclusive and less confrontational, rather than something top-down – 'leaders' (those people able to survive the political fight) fighting in a 'battle' of ideas.

Can there be bottom-up 'leadership' – a wider group of people engaged in constructive dialogue, through which different solutions can be tried out, refined, and the best ones taken forward? Whatever our hopes or fears for a wider political revolution of this kind – it is vital that we pay attention to a related 'revolution' within teams.

In his book *Leading and Coaching Teams to Success*, Phil Hayes (2011, p. 84) offers an insightful guide to how teams might shift from a context of 'adversarial debate' to one of more 'constructive dialogue'. We'll now consider one of his suggestions for making this transition.

Activity 3

 (1 hour)

Find one or two examples of recent meeting agendas. If your team meetings aren't so formal, write down a brief list of topics covered at a recent meeting or interaction with colleagues, then comment on the following:

- the way people spoke to each other at that meeting. Was there a difference in tone or 'energy' used in different parts of the meeting – perhaps some agenda items were more controversial? Exciting? Difficult to talk openly about?
- from your recollection, which voices dominated different areas of discussion on the agenda?
- do you remember any areas of conflict (mild or severe) and whether and how conflict was settled or developed in the meeting?

Provide your answer...

Answer

Meeting agendas tend to be set to guide the content of a meeting. They describe the items to be discussed. More often than not, agendas say nothing about how the meeting should be conducted, or how participants should interact with each other. Customs and practice within a team can quickly crystallise – meaning that there emerges a 'house style' of meeting. Teams are locked into behaving in particular ways when they meet.

If your team is not getting what it needs from meetings, it may not be the meeting content that is at fault – it may be the meeting style. Meetings will continue to disappoint unless something is done to adapt the style of meeting to the needs of its content (the standard agenda) and to the nature of its participants.

Think about Mandeep's scenario where meetings are too heated, too confrontational and full of conflict. For the benefit of those meeting participants, please complete the following paragraph of meeting guidance.

To stop this week's meeting becoming too adversarial, the first item on the agenda is to set some ground rules for conversation. Here are a few I thought might be useful:

In the next part of this activity (adapted from Hayes, 2011, p. 84) put the following statements into the correct columns. Some comments are principles of adversarial debate, others principles of effective dialogue.

Drag and drop statements to where you think they belong.

Interactive content is not available in this format.



Finally, choose one of the 'principles of effective dialogue' that you feel less comfortable with – perhaps one that you feel you or others in your team do not stick to. State the principle, then describe the 'first steps' you are going to take to promote and model this principle in your meetings.

Provide your answer...

Take home: to widen engagement, for authentic communication, teams need to be assured of the constructive style in which everyone is expected to interact. Different parts of a meeting agenda may require different styles of engagement (not everything needs a dialogue!). Setting some ground rules can help to set the 'tone' of a meeting. Decide (with others where possible) not just what you're going to discuss, but how you're going to discuss it.

Ideas featured in this section are informed by the practice of business 'coaching' and facilitated discussion. If you are interested in this kind of approach, you might like to consider studying our sister course [BG023 Coaching for Performance](#).

3 'X wants one thing, Y wants another, Z yet another – they're all too obstinate to give way!'

Sasha is a manager interested in developing a better team, as you will hear from the audio below (a transcript is also provided).

Audio content is not available in this format.



In this scenario, it sounds like effective dialogue between at least three of the team has broken down. Sasha senses the need to intervene, yet may lack the confidence to do so. Sasha is not too specific about what is causing the conflict.

In the next activity, there are a few suggested questions that might help Sasha.

Activity 4

Using the interactive below, click on each of the questions to explore the thinking behind them.

Interactive content is not available in this format.



Activity 5

 (30 minutes)

The previous activity raised many useful questions; to follow on, in this activity we seek more positive guidance. You will hear about two sorts of measures to address team conflict; as you will see, not every type of 'conflict' is bad for team performance and development:

1. Curative measures: mechanisms to intervene and support colleagues involved in conflict. These aim at bringing the team through a conflict situation. (We take the position that, although conflict is inevitable, the destructive outcome of conflict is certainly not inevitable.)
2. Preventative measures: setting up team structures and organising your teams in a way that helps reduce the frequency and impact of negative conflict. (We take the position that conflict is inevitable and cannot be eradicated.)

Now watch the following video extract from a round-table discussion involving business leaders and academics from The Open University. The discussion is entitled *Management Now: tomorrow's demands on today's leaders*. The title is informative because proficient management of conflict requires planning for the

future: establishing preventative measures, and being prepared to apply curative measures when needed.

Video content is not available in this format.

Webinar



- Note down one curative measure; and one preventative measure suggested by the panellists.

Provide your answer...

- How do you think 'being flexible' in dealing with conflict might be useful to a team leader?

Provide your answer...

- Describe a situation (one you've observed, or one you imagine) in which a manager might do well to keep out of a conflict situation between team members.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

- Kevin Sampson suggests regular meetings where 'sins' can be confessed. We interpret this as top-down encouragement by a manager to their team to be open about things that haven't gone well; e.g. areas where conflict may have arisen. Developing a tolerant and open culture, through the preventative measure of scheduling these meetings, gives an opportunity for others in the

team to support those 'in conflict' –in turn this can be seen as a curative measure: the team being involved in open dialogue about particular conflicts.

- Team members feel more comfortable with a consistent line or approach being taken by bosses. They may describe a manager as 'harsh but fair, even handed'. However, different conflict situations require different solutions. The manager needs a repertoire of ways of approaching conflict – for example, some situations would benefit from a highly 'visible' intervention by the manager, whilst others may benefit more from a low-level, subtle approach – 'quiet words' with the individuals involved.
- Allowing the parties in a conflict to resolve their own difficulties can have the effect of empowering them, perhaps even enhancing their future relationship. This isn't the same as a manager 'doing nothing' – they may need to monitor the situation very closely to instigate or facilitate communication between the parties. Crucially, managers should be prepared to change their approach in light of how a conflict develops.

Take home: although there is such a thing as 'creative conflict', a little bit of the 'wrong' kind of conflict can be devastating, both to individual wellbeing and team effectiveness. To maintain or support the re-establishing of trust within the team, managers need to interrogate the background to conflict and be prepared to intervene. Intervention does not always mean a direct and heavy-handed resolution by a 'superhero' boss.

Extension: watch the other three sections of the [Management Now roundtable discussion](#) (the full video is 30 minutes, including the section used in the activity above). Reflect on the extent to which participants in this video refer to communication and team management skills as key to preparing for future business demands.

4 'Is compromise good enough?'

Kai is a manager interested in developing a better team, as you will hear from the audio below (a transcript is also provided).

Audio content is not available in this format.



There is always more than one way to achieve the same set of objectives, and differences of approach within the team produces disagreement. The 'conflict' may escalate – we must be mindful of differences in opinion; it may impact on the efficiency of a team as time is taken debating the right way forward, so reaching a compromise position is often seen as a really good team achievement. In the activity that follows, we challenge the assumption that compromise is always the 'best' way for a team to travel together. We shift the emphasis to a more collaborative approach which involves more dialogue (perhaps even a lot of challenge and 'conflict') and can secure solutions that stakeholders can share.

Activity 6

 (10 minutes)

When did you last reach a compromise? In reaching that compromise did you have to 'give way' to others? Did you feel pressure to reach that compromise? Where did you feel that pressure came from?

Provide your answer...

Through dialogue, both parties in a conflict can come to a new, agreed position on an issue. Interestingly, where there is opportunity for true dialogue, we can agree without having to compromise. To see why, consider the following interactive figure which looks at the balance between assertiveness and cooperation. For clarity, we define these two terms as follows:

- **assertiveness:** attempts to satisfy your own concerns
- **cooperation:** attempts to satisfy the other person's concerns.

Click on each of the five words in the boxes to find out more about them.

Interactive content is not available in this format.



Figure 3 Five different categories of response to conflict, depending on how much assertion and cooperation is displayed in the conflict.

Taking a more positive attitude into negotiation; creating 'space' for disagreement to stimulate dialogue is neatly suggested by the following quote, adapted from the historian and philosopher Theodore Zeldin (1998):

The kind of conversation I like is one in which we are both prepared to emerge as slightly different people.

If all parties in a discussion adopt this approach – if they collaborate – the range of possible outcomes considered is vastly increased beyond the two outcomes of 'my way' and 'your way'.

Even if one of the parties ends up accepting the idea proposed by their 'opponent', in challenging that idea they are helping to test and develop it – and in an important sense, producing something new. Through collaboration they jointly find a way of doing things that has stood up to a challenge and found to be strong. Before the collaboration we only had a way of doing things that one party thought would not stand up to scrutiny.

Take home: whilst we must recognise conflict can be a devastating issue in the workplace, we suggest managers try to understand the positive effects controlled conflict can have on teams. The source of conflict is often an initial difference in perspective between team members (do it my way, or do it your way). Given time and better dialogue between team members, an emergent third-way (our way) can flourish. Compromise may be the best way to keep the peace within the team; but true collaboration transcends 'mere' compromise creating something that is made and 'owned' in partnership. In this section we've tried to provoke you beyond 'mere' compromise.

5 Dialectical approaches

We hope to have convinced you that the right kind of conflict can be creative. But how can this thinking be applied in practice – what sorts of tools and techniques can harness creative conflict? The following two readings should give a decent impression of practical ‘dialectical approaches’: where those holding different points of view can challenge each other through reasoned argument and dialogue, out of which new, shared approaches can emerge.



Figure 4 Janus, Roman god of transitions, is depicted as having two faces; hence, Janusian thinking looks from or at both sides of a situation simultaneously. It is one of the concepts helpful in developing a dialectical approach.

Activity 7

 (20 minutes)

Read this extract from pages 95–6 of the ‘Technique Library’ (Martin et al., 2012) drawn from an OU MBA course on ‘Sustainable creative management’.

DIALECTICAL APPROACHES

These techniques use creative conflict within the decision-making process to help identify and challenge assumptions and create new perceptions. The devil’s advocate approach can expose underlying assumptions, but tends to emphasise the negative. Dialectical inquiry may be more balanced.

The devil’s advocate

A person advocates a plan. Another person (or perhaps someone specially appointed to be used in this way) then takes the role of an adverse critic, examining the proposal and analysis for inconsistencies, inaccuracies and irrelevancies. This critique may be contained in a report, or a live confrontation session may be set up between proposer and critic, with key decision makers as observers. In the light of this, the decision makers can then accept, modify, or re-develop the proposal.

Dialectical inquiry

1. Form proposal and counter-proposal groups, and a review group which contains the senior manager involved. In informal use, these might reduce to single individuals.
2. The proposal group develops a plan, compiles a shortlist of the key assumptions underlying its plan, and hands this list to the counter-proposal group.
3. The counter-proposal group develops a counter-plan, taking each assumption, digging underneath it for a plausible counter-assumption, and using it to bring new data to the surface, re-interpret old data, and formulate a counter-plan.

The proposal and counter-proposal groups present their plans to the review group, outlining data and assumptions they consider important and probing weaknesses of the other side's plan. A facilitator maintains goodwill and prevents the combativeness becoming destructive. The review group looks out for further unmentioned assumptions that may be central to conceptualising the problem. When arguments begin repeating themselves, the facilitator ends the debate and there is a break to socialise and reconnect on a personal level. Led by the review group, the groups now work together to generate a list of agreed-upon core assumptions, and to generate a new plan. All the assumptions that figured prominently in the debate are pooled. Unsatisfactory assumptions are weeded out, and where possible, competing assumptions are either re-worked so as to be acceptable to both sides, or simple tests are devised to decide between them. Using Janusian thinking, it is often possible to combine and reword assumptions so that a new assumption encompasses the point of each side. Eventually the total group should generate a list of agreed-upon core assumptions, and then use these to generate a new plan. In most instances of using dialectic, the new plan is stronger and more realistic than the original plans.

Dialectical enquiry's originators were management scientists who have used it successfully in consulting work. Because the process must be consonant with the culture, it must be tailored to fit each organisation.

This kind of process can be viewed as the constructive use of conflict. The clash of opposing views creates something new and often more valid than either original view. The dialectic is a systematic way to critique a plan, its supporting data and underlying assumptions. Maps are sometimes hard to get hold of but the use of dialectic can render them more visible to a manager and thus more amenable to revision and improvement.

The group will need the skills and attitudes necessary for coping with messy problems – finding the right problem, drawing alternative maps, and employing humour, confidence and enthusiasm to keep the process going.

(adapted from: Thomas, 1988, pp. 67–9 and McCaskey, 1988, pp. 13–14)

Now read this extract from page 145 of the same 'Technique Library' (Martin et al., 2012), drawn from an OU MBA course on Sustainable Creative Management.

IDEA ADVOCATE

This is a simple form of *Dialectical approaches* and is also related to the organisational idea of having an idea champion to provide ongoing support and enthusiasm for a development project.

Given that the pool of ideas for tackling some issue has already been reduced to a small number (say three to six) of strong contenders:

1. One person (the 'idea advocate') is allocated to each idea to present a case for that idea. Obviously it is best if it is someone already known to be keen on the idea, or who proposed it, or who would have to implement it.
2. If necessary, a period of research time is made available to give each 'idea advocate' a chance to prepare his or her case.
3. A presentation is held in which each idea advocate presents the case for his or her assigned idea to the other idea advocates and the relevant decision makers.
4. The options are then discussed and decisions made. This could be a straightforward selection of the idea supported by the strongest case, or some composite of strong ideas. Alternatively (the 'lifeboat' model) there could be a series of rounds in which the weakest remaining idea is eliminated ('cast overboard') in each round, so that the better the idea, the more discussions and presentations it gets.

It is important to ensure that there are no major status or power differences between the idea advocates. The more sophisticated approaches described in *Dialectical approaches* handle the balance between positive and negative evaluation better.

(based on VanGundy, 1988, pp. 212–13)

Take home: some forms of conflict are constructive: they test and reveal things about ourselves and our work. Team members are thinking partners. Too often, our thinking partners are echo-chambers – they are too ready to agree with us, say yes and parrot back what we have said. Together we are too afraid to disagree. This means we avoid talk of a wide range of ideas and issues that might bring us into conflict with others. Heffernan makes the case that such avoidance is reckless and fails to get the best out of people. Good teams do 'travel together' – but the journey is long. Individuals and sub-teams may 'scout out' different ways of doing things (like bees foraging for nectar, a metaphor you will recall from the beginning of the unit) and in those exploratory phases they may be travelling in opposing directions for a while. Consider the scales on which your team is comfortable with conflict.

Extension: to build on the practical suggestions given in the readings on 'dialectical approaches' we suggest you seek out other tools and techniques for creative practice which can be applied in your own setting. One of our favourites which can be applied in many different contexts is a tool called ['Six Thinking Hats' popularised by Edward de Bono](#).

6 'We need to stretch ourselves'

Evelyn is a manager interested in developing her team, but worries that they may be 'too good' already. Listen to her plight in the audio below (a transcript is also provided).

Audio content is not available in this format.



Evelyn's team situation is one many of us will be envious of, particularly where we have stakeholders external to the team who set targets and have no difficulty in setting them even higher.

This team could just coast along – or wait until they are performing in a tougher environment and are then forced into change – or until something else disrupts their smooth running. Fortunately, in Evelyn, they have a manager who is not prepared to accept that status quo. Evelyn recognises a great team that gets results, but wants an even better team that gets even better results.

This professional development course – and many others like it – treat 'development' as though it is something we should all be doing, no matter what, as if change is important for its own sake. We would qualify this by saying that it must be 'the right kind of change' or 'a change for the better' – something that enhances current performance, or future capacity. Such are the shifting sands on which our organisations are built, such is the dynamic environment we find ourselves in – we cannot afford not to 'develop', but we must develop into something 'better'.

In the context of Evelyn's too-happy team scenario then – how is 'better' established? If there is no clear direction being forced on this team – how should they find one?

When teams are set a goal – or have been working towards the same goal for a very long time – the goal itself isn't questioned. Most of the thinking or innovation happens around 'how' to achieve that fixed goal. In the next activity, we're going to turn that traditional perspective on its head.

Activity 8

 (40 minutes)

What do you already have in your team that could help it do more or do different? In broad terms, list the skills, equipment and other resources that your team has at its disposal.

Provide your answer...

If your team wasn't spending time reaching your current goal – what could it do instead? List the sorts of 'outputs' (products or services) which your team could provide to others if given the freedom to do so. How close are those 'outputs' to the ones you currently offer?

Provide your answer...

Now what do you really want? What would 'better' look like? Write down which of the alternatives you've been considering might be something good for the team and its business. How would adopting this new 'goal' stretch the team further?

Provide your answer...

You don't have ultimate freedom (without breaking free from your organisation!), but what new ideas might your organisation be interested in? What new products/ services might your team be able to provide for clients? If there is no scope for diversification in what you offer, think about 'how' you provide your current offer to clients/internal customers.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

We appreciate it will have been hard to 'break free' from thinking about what the current team is working towards. The activity may have been 'too much blue-sky thinking'. We wanted you to engage with this to realise more of the potential within your current team – it already has the means to produce a whole range of different outputs – to achieve different goals. Not just more of the same (it is easy to set a target for 'more of the same'), but something different. The process you've undertaken here can also help you think about changing 'how' you deliver: before focussing on what you think you need to achieve

Take home: look at what you've got before deciding where you're going. Where you have the luxury, use your assessment of your team's means to inform, extend or vary your team goal. You've done this activity in isolation from your team – but its real power is in being performed as a team – so the team can 'buy in' to what they're working towards.

Extension: Our approach to this section has been inspired by a 'movement' represented by the [Society for Effectual Action](#). Effectual thinking challenges the orthodoxy of 'causal' managerial thinking (having a goal in mind, then drawing in the means to achieve that goal) instead, promoting a view that the future should be shaped by the people (the means) by which various imagined goals might be achieved.

Conclusion

This short course used the metaphor of the bee colony (where difference and challenge are used to further the collective aims of the organisation). You went on to look at 3 mini case-studies of managers who want to develop better teams – and how they – and how you – might recognise and come to value difference and challenge in teams.

Many of the scenarios presented in this course have looked at areas of disagreement. What we have tried to convey is that although the ‘overall direction of travel’ needs to be the same for the team as a whole, deviations from each other’s individual path should be allowed.

The very direction of travel is influenced by the team itself (recall the river, whose course is influenced by both the existing terrain and the river itself) and there are many well-meaning suggestions on which routes to take (recall the bees, and their different ideas on where to gather nectar: group decisions are formed on the basis of diverse individual perspectives).

Some of the text may have annoyed you, or challenged the way you think about certain terms. For example:

- Conflict, historically, has been a strongly negative term and the thought of ‘embracing’ conflict may appall your team. Yet, there you can recognise some value in opposition and the ‘challenges’ that need to be made to ensure the robustness of decisions and outcomes for the team.
- Compromise is, for many, a positive and peaceful term – something we often want to have much more of in the team. In this unit we’ve thought about what it means to put up with a ‘mere’ compromise – and whether by aiming for compromise positions (where some of the team get some of what they need, and others in the team have some of their different needs met) we are missing out on more truly collaborative solutions (where everyone in the team feels that they have contributed to the development of a solution as a whole: ‘we have created our way of doing this’).

We hope ‘provocations’ like this – and the reflections we’ve encouraged, have been useful to you, whether your team suffers from too much conflict or too much compromise – whether the development journey you are travelling on is too rough, or too smooth.