

A TEAM IN CONFLICT

In the middle of difficulty lies opportunity.

—Albert Einstein

We love a good story. You know the kind we're talking about. Our favorite stories share common themes of underdogs thrust into pivotal roles, good people persevering, a few unexpected twists, and ultimately a celebration of good triumphing over evil. The very best ones get passed on from generation to generation and beg to be retold time and again.

We hope the story we're about to tell shares these characteristics. At the very least, we hope it is one you will feel good about sharing with others. Oh, one more thing: this story is absolutely true. We'll reveal the identity of this rather amazing real-life tale a few pages from now. Until then, take note of the conflicts contained in the storyline. Look for the impact of each conflict and how these conflicts were addressed. See if you can find value in how the conflicts were handled. We also hope you find yourself guessing at the identity of the organization. So don't look ahead. Just sit back, relax, and enjoy.

The Organization

The organization had long aspired to be thought of as world class in a highly competitive industry. Over the years, it had gained a reputation for being long on potential, but it had failed to reach and maintain the peak level of performance and results for which it was founded. Only once in its sixty-year history had the organization been considered truly one of the best in its class.

This achievement was short-lived, considered a fluke, and never again attained.

The organization had many characteristics that were the envy of its competitors. Its facilities and offices were top notch. State-of-the-art equipment and tools were in place. The investment in education and training of personnel was second to none. The organization's board and stakeholders were generous with their support. Executive leaders and content experts were among the most experienced and talented in the world. Their product was truly a source of pride for all associates. And consumers were willing, even eager, to embrace the organization and its product. Despite all these stellar characteristics, the organization somehow seemed to wallow through its existence, never producing the kind of results for which it seemed so capable. Potential evolved into frustration. Eventually frustration led to a changing of the leadership.

The Search

As the board searched for the right executive to take over the reins, the search committee found the organization to be a tougher sell than they had anticipated. The board was committed to recruiting the very best leader available. The compensation package was certainly worthy of a world-class leader, and the challenge of leading this well-known but underachieving organization seemed likely to spur the interest of the very best of the best. As time passed, the search committee found itself in the unlikely position of seeing its top candidate bow out of the running. Left with but a few solid candidates, the board decided to offer the top position to a man who was well known in the field and had significant experience and a compelling record of success, but he had never presided over an organization of this size and significance. He was also known for his intense, driving, even demanding personality. He demonstrated this characteristic during his final interview when he made two rather

unique requests of the search committee and the board. First, he suggested a radical new method of operations. Second, he wanted their support for embarking on a nationwide search for talented employees. And he wanted to personally spearhead the search and the subsequent orientation and training of these new associates. In fact, without these accommodations, he said he would not consider accepting the position if offered.

The search committee pondered their decision. The risks were weighed, résumés reviewed, and candidates discussed. In the end, the committee decided to offer their prized top leadership role to this experienced and admittedly demanding man, whom we'll call Bert. Amid appropriate fanfare, he was introduced as the organization's best hope for finally fulfilling its promise.

Finding New Talent

Bert was thrilled with the opportunity and poured himself into his new role. True to form, he set out to find the most highly talented staff available. Because he had years of experience in the industry, he knew exactly where to look. Many of those he targeted for recruitment were well known to him from past industry competition and conferences. He knew that to find the most talented people, he would have to recruit from a number of different organizations, some of them fierce competitors. Within a few weeks, he contacted scores of experts and invited them for interviews and testing. And with the board's blessing, he hired a "lieutenant," whom we'll call Pat, to assist him in his recruiting, selection, and training efforts.

Over a fairly short period of a time, Bert and Pat whittled the field of potential new associates down to about two dozen. Some of the candidates withdrew their candidacy in reaction to Bert's methods and approach. Others privately wondered whether they would want to work for a man seemingly so focused and intense. Some questioned the wisdom of recruiting people who

had openly, sometimes brazenly, competed with one another in the past. In addition, the business practices and standards of these competing organizations were often markedly different. The potential for conflict among the new staff seemed incredibly high. Those who ultimately accepted the offer to become new members of the organization knew that they faced a steep challenge.

Conflicting Perspectives

Bert created an orientation and training process designed to leverage the best attributes of his newly hired team. He had already drawn criticism over his selections of personnel; some of the board members, in fact, openly questioned his judgment. Bert's response was that each person had been selected to fill a specific role on the team. He admitted that not each person was the top expert in his field. Rather, he likened each new person to a piece of a larger puzzle. Each piece needed to fit perfectly. In his quest for that perfect fit, he demanded thoroughness of preparation and an unrelenting focus on fundamental knowledge and skills. His newly hired charges sometimes grew weary of Bert's passion and tireless drive to craft the members into a single unit. He expected his staff to embrace his vision and pursue it with conviction. Unfortunately, his expectations were not always met.

To make matters worse, a number of the new associates carried baggage from previous relationships and interactions with one another. Several members were absolutely incensed that some of their new colleagues had been competitors, even enemies, in their previous work. One example of the bad blood among the group involved a prestigious industry award that had been bestowed on a company from Minnesota. Several members of that organization were now among Bert's new recruits. As luck would have it, several members of the second-place company for that award were also new members of Bert's organization.

The award had been hotly contested, and the winners were accused (by the second-place organization) of unethical practices that led directly to the award. Not surprisingly, the bitterness of that event carried over into the new organization and contributed to the rift among team members. Moreover, some of the new associates' best friends had been rejected for positions in the firm in favor of those with whom they had competed in the past. It seemed virtually impossible to fathom that this group would be able to work together as associates, somehow putting aside past differences.

Finally, there were moments when Bert and Pat failed to see eye-to-eye. As Bert pushed his troops to stretch beyond their previous limits, Pat sometimes questioned his tactics. Team members complained to Pat about Bert's demanding standards and practices. But Pat absolutely believed in Bert's expertise and supported the notion that the new team members had to work as one in order to be successful. Nevertheless, he occasionally wondered if Bert's tactics were aligned with their ultimate mission and goals. Pat found himself yielding to Bert's decisions often without sharing his thoughts or perspectives.

As Bert pushed his agenda, patience and restraint among the workers wore thin. Tempers flared. Associates avoided one another. Teammates talked behind each other's backs. There were even a few reports of physical altercations. In addition, Pat privately wondered if Bert's passion was interfering with his decision making. Bert's grand design appeared to be in jeopardy. The board members who had hired him just a few months earlier began having doubts. Could their ultimate goal sink any further from realization?

Turning Points

As the weeks wore on, training sessions, exercises, and simulations gave way to real business engagements. Along the way, a number of events signaled that the organization was beginning

to come together. In one case, several associates took it on themselves to acknowledge and confront poor behaviors associated with the bad history among some of their teammates. This led to constructive discussions about the past and agreements to move forward. Another example involved the relationship between Bert and Pat. Bert began to more openly seek Pat's perspective regarding his approach and tactics. Pat confided that he questioned some of them. They talked and worked through their differences while forging an even more respectful partnership. In another case, near the end of one particularly demanding training session, one associate spoke passionately about the need for the group to work as one. This associate was later selected to become one of a few designated team leaders. These examples, and many similar others, showed a resolve to work through the differences, disagreements, and discord. But none demonstrated this organization's ability to deal with conflict better than the following.

Bert believed in training. He offered scores of opportunities for the new associates to participate in exercises and simulations to sharpen their skills, develop relationships, and establish the culture of the now restructured organization. Near the end of the orientation and training period, Bert brought in a new associate. This person had worked for Bert in the past and was a recognized expert and top performer. He was undeniably a great potential resource and asset for the team. Nevertheless, many associates objected to the introduction of a new teammate at this stage of the organization's development. Several sought a meeting with Bert to discuss their disapproval and disappointment over the introduction of the new associate. They described how the current members had formed a bond and that introducing a new member now could interfere with their team development. During their dialogue, Bert asked if the current team was the best it could be. The associates answered that it might not yet be, but that the trust they had developed was the foundation on which the organization could successfully continue to

build in its quest of their ultimate goal. Bert's eyes twinkled as he agreed not to upset the delicate balance that had been forged and subsequently released the new associate. The organization had come full circle.

Success

The new company took off. In the span of just a few days, its success was documented in the headlines of newspapers and as the lead story on newscasts. The team effort displayed drew praise from pundits far and wide. A sense of wonder and admiration grew from around the country, even the rest of the world. The years of frustration seemed to melt away like icicles glinting and dripping in the warm spring sunshine. The conflicts of the past few months paled in comparison to the sweet taste of victory and achievement. Bert's vision, his dream, and the dream of the entire organization had been realized. "Do you believe in miracles? . . . Yes!!" screamed broadcaster Al Michaels as he described the final seconds of the improbable victory on national television. The 1980 U.S. Olympic Hockey Team had defeated the highly favored Soviet Union team in the first game of the medal round. They went on to win the gold medal.

Upon Further Review

The gold medal win of the 1980 U.S. Olympic Hockey Team is arguably one of the biggest underdog achievements of all time. Its victory over the Soviet team, which had won over forty-five games in a row at the time, was dubbed the "Miracle on Ice." It is the story of teammates achieving through hard work and perseverance. It is the story of a leader (Bert is Herb Brooks) who provided focus, vision, and a belief in the team. It's the story of a team overcoming incredible odds, barriers, and limitations as they established a climate of trust and collaboration. It is the story of an assistant coach (Pat is Craig Patrick) who often

provided encouragement and support to team members. And it's a story that illustrates how a team handled conflict in ways that enabled it to succeed beyond its wildest dreams.

Ingredients for Conflict Competence

I (Tim) was a young man in graduate school in 1980. I remember watching the astonishing victory of the U.S. Hockey Team over the Soviet Union with some friends in my tiny apartment in Columbus, Ohio. We whooped our approval, toasted the players (who were roughly our age), and reveled in amazement. But I had no idea of the true depth of this team's achievement. At the time, I viewed it like virtually every other sports fan did: the incredible story of a bunch of relatively unknown kids defeating the best hockey team in the world. Today it's remembered as one of the biggest upsets in modern team sports history. I also submit that it is a wonderful example of a conflict competent team. Let's review several key characteristics of the 1980 U.S. Olympic Hockey Team that illustrate what it takes to achieve conflict competence as a team.

First, consider the climate the team was able to create in a relatively short period of time. Coach Brooks was clear in his vision of creating a new style of play necessary to compete at the highest level. He was equally clear that this new style would emphasize speed and conditioning. He spoke most often, however, about the team chemistry that would be necessary to implement the new style of play. Technique, skill, and ability alone could not produce the desired results; something more intangible was critical. Team chemistry, the climate, and the quality of the interactions between and among players had to be just right.

The coaches and players came together over a span of mere months. During this time, they established relationships resulting not only in the ability to read one another's moves on the ice but bonds that have lasted a lifetime. Their mission was admittedly unique: it required that team members didn't just

play hockey together; they became a family that literally worked, traveled, and lived together. Certainly most of the people reading this book are members of teams that work long, demanding hours but stop somewhere short of living together. Nevertheless, establishing the right climate is critical for handling conflict. Teams must develop trust, and team members must feel safe. Emotions must be handled with care. These essential ingredients of the right climate—trust, safety, and emotional intelligence—are necessary for building conflict competent teams.

Next consider the level of collaboration among the teammates. For the casual fan watching the games, the collaborative effort could be easily taken for granted. Most of us expect athletic teams, especially those performing at high levels, to be models of “teamness.” One of the defining characteristics of this team was the way the players came together and worked as a single unit during their amazing run at the Olympic Games. Their collaborative effort was based on a number of key factors. The team clearly had a specific game plan crafted by the coach, Herb Brooks. Moreover, the players embraced the plan, and everyone understood it. Everyone knew their specific role and accepted responsibility for fulfilling that role. Players held each other accountable. In the early stages of the team’s development, Coach Brooks was much more involved in holding team members accountable. As the team evolved, the players held one another accountable. Expectations were clear, and team members were committed to them. These factors led to a mutual accountability among the players that fed their collaborative efforts.

One way to describe the team’s method of working together is “complete collaboration.” A similar but slightly more expansive term that we will use throughout the book is *behavioral integration*. The highest levels of behavioral integration are characterized by mutual accountability, collaboration, collective decision making, and shared expectations. The 1980 U.S. Hockey Team demonstrated each of these at virtually every juncture of their development. (Collective decision making is probably the least

obvious of these characteristics. It was most evident in the later stages of development and was clearest during games and when the team traveled together. However, one of the best examples of collective decision making was illustrated when team members decided to confront Coach Brooks about the potential addition of a new player late in the training program.)

Finally, consider the quality of communication among team members. It's no secret that the team members had to overcome some significant emotional challenges and barriers as they developed into a high-performing team. Stories abound regarding the friction among players who had played for opposing college teams. In fact, a number of players from the University of Minnesota and Boston University had been involved in one of the nastiest college hockey brawls in memory during the 1976 NCAA tournament (Coffey, 2005). Not surprisingly, there was no love lost among these strange bedfellows. As the team experienced training camp together, players had to interact. In fact, the team concept that Coach Brooks demanded made it impossible not to interact.

A shining example of high-quality communication is illustrated by the way teammates resolved long-standing feuds. Teammates sometimes served as mediators for those who were at odds. Coach Patrick stepped in to help teammates communicate through their difficulties. At other times, teammates simply agreed to talk things out among themselves. Addressing difficulties is but one circumstance requiring productive communication. The most conflict competent teams not only address their difficulties effectively, they communicate constructively nearly all the time (no team is perfect). It is imperative that team members communicate frequently with clarity and care. We'll refer to this characteristic throughout the book as *constructive communication*.

In the movie *Miracle*, the silver screen depiction of the 1980 team, one of the most dramatic scenes depicts the aftermath of a lackluster performance during an exhibition game several months prior to the start of the Olympics. The game ended in

a tie. During the game Coach Brooks noticed poor communication among his players and a lack of accountability and collaboration. To his great dismay, he saw evidence that the team chemistry had eroded.

After the postgame handshake with the opposing team, he ordered his team to stay on the ice. He expressed his disappointment with the team's effort and lack of commitment to its principles. In an act of legendary proportion, he challenged his players to reach a higher level and began pushing the team through line drills. These drills are essentially wind sprints on skates where players line up at one end of the rink and then skate back and forth between the lines on the ice at top speed. It's an exhausting exercise designed to build stamina. In this case, though, stamina was not Coach Brooks's main goal. Bear in mind these sprints were taking place after the completion of a full game when players were already tired. During brief breaks between sprints, the story portrays Coach Brooks asking loudly of players, "Who do you play for?" In turn, players responded with "Boston University," or "University of Minnesota," or "Bowling Green," and the others. The sprints continued until Mike Eruzione, later named captain, shouted, "I play for the United States of America!" Upon hearing Eruzione's exclamation, Coach Brooks ended the drills. The point was clear. The team had reached a crossroads, a turning point of sorts. The players identified themselves as a single unit signified by a single name. Team identity, team chemistry, teamness—whatever you call it, this dramatization points out that the most conflict competent teams identify themselves first and foremost as a team, not as a loose group of individuals.

A Great But Not Perfect Example

As we studied the story of the 1980 U.S. Olympic Hockey team, we found some methods and characteristics that we are not suggesting as examples of exemplary team effectiveness.

For instance, not all of Coach Brooks's approaches demonstrated great relationship building. In fact, most accounts suggest that he purposely distanced himself from the players and left relationship building to Craig Patrick, his assistant coach. And not every interaction between and among players set the standard for effective communication or collaboration. The players had plenty of differences.

This team had its warts, as all teams do. Team members sometimes caused conflicts and perpetuated them. The coach was often the target of the players' disdain. The point is, that as conflicts were encountered, this team found effective ways to deal with them. In many cases, conflicts formed the bedrock for building stronger intra-team relationships and collaboration. Conflicts provided opportunities to bring more intense focus on team goals rather than individual goals. In some instances, conflicts helped initiate conversations between and among team members who otherwise may not have interacted in such meaningful ways.

As a case study illustrating factors of conflict competence in a team, we believe the story of the 1980 U.S. Olympic Hockey team provides an excellent example. It's a wonderful bonus that this story has almost mythical proportions. We hope it helps you embrace the potential that is inherent in the conflict your team encounters. And we encourage you to share the story with your teammates, colleagues, and friends.

So What?

So what now? We've shared the story of the 1980 U.S. Olympic Hockey team. The "Miracle on Ice" has become a symbol for every team striving to achieve its dreams when the odds are stacked against it. The hockey team responded to many challenges, including conflicts, in ways that enabled it to succeed beyond anyone's expectations. We believe every team can learn what it takes to be similarly conflict competent. The necessary

ingredients for conflict competence can be identified, examined, and described. That's the good news. But applying and integrating these ingredients, especially when a team is already embroiled in destructive levels of conflict, can be quite difficult. It wasn't easy for the hockey team, and it won't necessarily be easy for your team. The payoffs for taking the challenges however, can be extraordinary. If you are interested in exploring how your team can overcome the destructive impact of conflict, continue reading. If you are intrigued by the notion of tapping into the vast potential inherent in conflict, read on. Even if you're a little skeptical that conflict can be leveraged to your team's advantage, finish reading, and then let your teammates borrow the book. We are excited to share what we've learned about conflict, and we're eager to hear from you once you begin exploring, even embracing, conflict on your team.

We talked with literally hundreds of people in a variety of organizations about conflict in teams. We spoke with executives, officers, general managers, vice presidents, and directors. We also spoke with technicians, players, engineers, service workers, and attendants. We asked them to describe how their teams handled conflicts. We observed their meetings and interactions. We also observed their "meetings after the meeting" and the impact of their intended and unintended communications. We reviewed the research and literature regarding conflict in organizations and between parties. We have spent extensive time in the classroom and in consultation with clients. This book is the culmination of our discussions, observations, research, teaching, and consultations. Our intent is to share what we have learned with you. Let's begin the sharing with a brief overview of what's to come.

Basic Premise

In our previous book, *Becoming a Conflict Competent Leader*, we suggested that when at least two people are together for any length of time, conflict is inevitable. We offered a behavioral view

of conflict based on the work of our colleagues Sal Capobianco, Mark Davis, and Linda Kraus: we suggested that conflict begins with sometimes minor differences and evolves over time. We focused on the fascinating volume of diversity in our organizations. People are different: we have different values, different styles, different personalities, different experiences, and different perspectives. This being the case, we suggested that leaders and anyone aspiring to become a leader be prepared to deal with the inevitable conflicts that arise out of these differences.

We also suggested that conflict can result in positive and negative outcomes. Regarding leaders, we said that conflict exists at the root of some of their best ideas and at the core of many of their worst failures. We believe these same concepts hold true in reference to teams. When handled effectively, conflict within teams can result in surprisingly satisfying outcomes. People are treated with respect. Relationships are strengthened. Conflicts become challenges. Challenges are overcome. Victories are celebrated. Confidence grows. Competence develops.

One significant issue with conflict is that most of us have not learned effective ways to deal with it. In fact, many of us steer clear of conflict at all costs. Others engage passionately in conflict, but in ways that are perceived as hostile, angry, tough, or retaliatory. These two types of behavior, described often as fight-or-flight responses, form the basis for most people's immediate reactions to conflict. Despite these built-in response mechanisms, we can learn to handle conflict more effectively. That's one of the beauties of conflict: effective responses can be learned and applied.

These are our basic premises of conflict:

- Conflict is inevitable.
- Conflict can have both positive and negative results.
- People often use fight-or-flight responses to conflict.
- People can learn more effective conflict skills.

A Preview: Three Critical Characteristics

This book is intended to help teams and team members assess their current level of conflict competence, select areas for improvement, provide some practical guidance for handling conflicts more effectively, and leverage conflict to their advantage. We focus on practicality over theory. Although we cite some timely scholarly research regarding conflict and present some intriguing data from recent studies, we are committed to examining the consequences of mishandling conflict and the satisfaction in and advantages of constructively managing conflict. This overview of three critical characteristics of conflict competent teams will make our intentions clearer.

The Right Climate

Trust among teammates is necessary for a team to build conflict competence. Without trust, intentions are misunderstood, aspersions are cast, attributions are made, and assumptions become real. With trust, there is seldom “intention invention” among teammates. Misunderstandings, when they occur, are investigated. Therefore, aspersions and attributions are seldom cast or made. Assumptions are stated clearly, and when they are incorrect, they are quickly resolved.

Trust can be fleeting and fragile if it is not nurtured on a consistent, even deliberate, basis. In Chapter Three we examine the nature of trust in teams. Nearly every person with whom we spoke described trust as the foundation for teams that handle conflict effectively. Specifically, we explore the notion of believing in the good intentions of others as the basis for genuine openness among team members. Vulnerability, far too often described as a weakness, is essential for developing the deepest levels of trust. Of course, in order for team members to show vulnerability, safety is imperative. And what is safe to one team member may not be safe for another. Finally, we look at the role

of emotional intelligence as we explore the intricate weaving of trust, vulnerability, and safety in establishing the right climate.

Behavioral Integration

The essence of complete collaboration has been described by some of our colleagues as “teamness.” We’re not even sure that *teamness* is a word, especially since our spell-checking software highlights each reference to it in our text and it’s not in the dictionary. Nevertheless, we have heard it often enough to use it here. Much of the research on conflict in teams refers to mutuality as a key factor in resolving conflict effectively. Other terms and descriptions that speak to the essence of behavioral integration include *cooperation*, *collectiveness*, *joint decision making*, *togetherness*, *cohesiveness*, *shared commitment*, *shared values*, and *team rewards*. One of our favorite descriptions was that “a conflict competent team comes together and moves together.”

In Chapter Three, in addition to discussing the right climate, we explore how teams can achieve teamness or behavioral integration. It is clear to us that establishing the right climate is dependent on behavioral integration, and true behavioral integration is dependent on the right climate. As teams become behaviorally integrated, they discover that they not only handle conflict more effectively, but they are able to take advantage of the opportunities conflict brings to the surface. Differences among team members are valuable building blocks on which new ideas, creative solutions, and unrealized potential can be launched. Teams that become behaviorally integrated are more likely to see their differences and conflicts as advantages and opportunities rather than barriers and traps.

Constructive Communication

At the root of just about every effective human interaction is communication. Not surprisingly, effective communication is critical to conflict competence in teams. The ways in which

teams communicate, the quality of communication, the skill it takes to communicate before, during, and after conflict, and techniques for effective conflict management are discussed in Chapters Four and Five.

Constructive communication, as we describe it, includes what people say and how they say it. In a team environment, communication among team members is akin to the relationship between a person's head and heart. It is the conduit for understanding. The better equipped each member is to communicate constructively, the more likely it is that he or she will address conflict effectively. Therefore, we look at techniques such as devil's advocacy for expanding the opportunities presented by conflict. We examine skills such as empathy and perspective taking for responding to others' emotions and ideas. We suggest ways to use verbal and nonverbal behaviors to cool conflict. Whether repairing destructive conflict or embracing constructive conflict, communication is the vehicle for doing so effectively.

Another Thing or Two

As we discussed team conflict with other people, we discovered that a variety of special circumstances seemed to crop up in our conversations. For some, these special circumstances were nearly overwhelming. We have devoted Chapter Six to several of these circumstances. Specifically, we consider some of the challenges presented by geographically dispersed teams, culturally diverse teams, and the use of technology in communicating among team members.

Finally, we conclude by offering in Chapter Seven some basic getting-started tips, guidelines, and suggestions. Our hope is that teams will be able to use Chapter Seven for assessing their current level of conflict competence, repairing ongoing conflicts, and strengthening their ability to embrace and take advantage of differences and conflict. The Resources section offers suggestions and recommendations for further exploration and assistance.

