Case Notes

# Chapter 11: Managing Conflict

# Case 11.1: Office Space

## Case Summary

A change in office space and office environment led to considerable conflict between five co-workers in a web programming department. Due to a company relocation, a web programming department was forced to change from an open-space environment to a row of cubicles in a much smaller office.

Martin, the web programming team leader had the opportunity to choose the order of where the programmers would be stationed within the row. He chose to order himself in the first cubicle, and down the line, Rosa, Sanjay, Kris, and Bradley. He had reasons for this arrangement; Bradley had the most equipment out of any of the programmers, and he wanted Bradley to be at the end with the most space. Also, Rosa and Kris spent a significant amount of time speaking to each other, and Martin figured by putting Sanjay between them, he could limit the amount of time spent on conversation.

Unfortunately, Martin never shared his justification for assignments with his colleagues, which created significant conflict. First, Bradley wanted a cubicle with a window and a position next to Martin, since they work together on a significant number of projects. Next, Sanjay’s mood changes, as he is in between Rosa and Kris and cannot focus when they speak over him to each other. Subsequently, this has caused Rosa and Kris to leave their cubicles to converse with each other, taking more time than they used to when they were sitting together, which has impacted both of their productivity. All the while, this has upset Bradley, who feels slighted because the other programmers are being rewarded while he is stuck in a cubicle that he does not want. Because of this, Bradley will only speak and communicate to Martin when he absolutely needs something.

Martin is now in a position where he must decide what to do. He can’t understand that the cohesive team that he used to lead can’t get along over their cubicle assignments.

Case Analysis

This case study outlines the perils of what could happen when open lines of communication are not present and **conflict** arises. The web programming team was described in the case as very synergistic, displaying a significant amount of **collaboration** between team members.

The type of conflict that appears throughout the case is mostly **content conflict**. All of Martin’s team members do not understand the cubicle assignments, most likely because Martin never explained his justification, and his technique to deal with their conflict has been **avoidance.** This has caused an underlying **relational conflict** to be present between the team members, regardless if this was Martin’s desired intention or not.

## Sample Answers to Case Questions

*1. How would you describe the conflict that has arisen between the members of the web programming department?*

The conflict has come from tension because Martin has avoided discussing any issues between his team members. Open communication is not occurring, and the individuals on Martin’s team are not openly discussing their issues, which has caused something that could have been a simple problem to solve to grow into something impacting both work environment and work performance.

*2. Is the conflict a relational conflict? If so, what type of relational conflict? Is there a content dimension to this conflict?*

There are elements of the conflict that could be classified as relational conflict. Bradley’s conflict with Martin is relational conflict over issues of esteem. Bradley believes that his seniority has awarded him preferential seating (with a window) and feels disrespected that Martin did not see things from his perspective. Implicitly, there may also be relational conflict over issues of control in this case as well. Martin did not allow his co-workers to select their placement, thus causing the problems that occurred in the first place.

There is a conflict dimension to this conflict, as Martin’s co-workers did not have input over their seating aragements, which could be construed as something that has impacted how the web programming team meets their goals.

*3. Using Fisher and Ury’s method of principled negotiation, how would you separate the people from the problem? What do you think is really, really going on in this conflict?*

In this case, Martin needs to indicate that the current arrangement of seating has impacted collaboration and has impacted the team’s ability to get work done. As the supervisor, the first thing that Martin needs to address is the seating arrangements, as this could

The main issue in this conflict is avoidance. Martin never addressed the problems as they occurred, and instead focused his effort on trying to work through the problems without discussing them as they were occurring. It is very difficult to believe that these problems could not have been avoided altogether had Martin simply just asked his co-workers for their preferences or addressed problems as they occurred. This is the case of a situation spiraling completely out of control.

*4. Using the Kilmann and Thomas conflict styles, how would you characterize Sanjay’s conflict style? What about Bradley’s? Do Rose and Kris have a style as well?*

Sanjay’s conflict style appears to be a combination of avoidance and competition. On one hand, Sanjay does not directly confront the problem of Rose and Kris’s discussion with Martin, however, he is very confrontational to Rose and Kris themselves. It could be argued that there are elements of competition in Sanjay’s conflict style as well, as he does not want to sacrifice his window seat to be removed from being in-between Rose and Kris.

Bradley’s conflict style is definitely avoidance. Instead of directly addressing his issues with Martin, he has avoided collaboration altogether, except when it is absolutely necessary. Had Martin and Bradley, who appeared to have a fantastic relationship before the change in offices, openly discussed their problems, their conflict may have easily been avoided.

If Rose and Kris have a conflict style, it could be described as more collaborative. Unlike all of the other relationships in this office which appear fractured, they still appear to be getting along just fine, albeit slightly less productive.

*5. How could Martin use fractionation and face saving in attempting to resolve this conflict?*

Fractionation is the technique of breaking down conflict into smaller, more manageable pieces. Face saving is the act of allowing one to change a situation while protecting their own self-image. This situation can be resolved by using both. If Martin does not want to directly address the problems, it is possible that one simple change to seating arrangements may help the situation. By saying that he needed to be closer to Bradley, by Martin switching Bradley and Rosa’s position, he could avoid the bigger issue on the table, give Bradley a window seat, allow Rosa and Kris to sit next to each other, and leave Sanjay in a position where he is not in the middle of Rosa and Kris anymore. In this scenario, Martin would not have to “admit he was wrong” and could save face and potentially eliminate the problems altogether.