Conflict Resolution in Project Management using the Mediation Process

Mediation has a structured process that allows a mediator to handle, analyze, control, and guide parties in conflict toward a resolution of their dispute. Once the mediator starts handling the conflict, he is going to manage it through three main stages: initiation, meetings (joint or private), and outcome (agreement, non-agreement). It is the mediator's responsibility to guide the parties to a satisfactory resolution for their conflict. Besides having a structured process, what makes mediation suitable for project managers to use to manage conflicts in their project is that mediation uses a collaborative approach between the mediator and the parties, which aims to facilitate the parties' conversation and transform their relationship.

But how does the mediator have a collaborative approach? And how can a project manager benefit from mirroring it? First, it is important to understand the definition of being a mediator. Mediators are neutral third parties who assist two or more people to find a solution for an issue or issues they are having. Being a neutral third party means that, although the mediator has his own opinions and beliefs, he is not taking sides by trying to find who's wrong or who's right on that specific issue. Project managers may be invited to act as mediators so they can help team members or stakeholders to achieve a resolution for any dispute. As with mediators, who aim to assist the parties to find a solution that has elements that honor both parties' interests, or at least that does not violate their needs, project managers can help project team members to find a resolution for their dispute. And that solution should be in alignment to the project's scope and needs.

Project managers must start conflict management even before any conflict occurs in the project. There are a few actions that project managers should take to mitigate the risk of a conflict.

The first one is to establish team ground rules. Team ground rules are formed and communicated by the project manager to the project team members in the first project kick-off meeting. Team ground rules specify the behaviors and responsibilities that are expected of the project team members, including any other stakeholders, throughout the project's life cycle. An example would be that project team members are expected to arrive on time and to participate in all meetings they are assigned to. If for any reason they can't, their immediate supervisor or the project manager should be advised of the reasons they are not attending that meeting.

While communicating the team ground rules , the project manager should also allow the team members and stakeholders to provide feedback and offer their own suggestions and needs. In doing so, and in communicating the team ground rules , the project manager has a powerful tool to start mitigating the risk of conflicts.

The second action to be taken by the project manager to start conflict management before the occurrence of any conflict is the creation of a project conflict ground rules document. In that document, the project manager establishes the level of responsibility that each team member has in resolving a conflict. The project team members should be primarily responsible for the resolution of any conflict they are experiencing. The project manager may decide to delegate the resolution of the conflict to the team members' immediate supervisor if a resolution is not being reached by them. The project manager may also establish that any conflict not resolved or any conflict at any stage must be communicated to her immediately. Any dispute that jeopardizes the project plan and prior commitments to the project's sponsoring organization is an example of a dispute that needs the project manager's quick intervention. Being able to delegate conflict management to others allows the project manager to work on team building and to bring high morale to the project.

When the conflict is escalated to the project manager, and she still does not have the team members' cooperation in finding a solution, she can call on her authority to make a decision on the issue that brought the parties into a conflict. She can also establish disciplinary actions towards uncooperative team members. Those disciplinary actions should also be already communicated in the project conflict ground rules .

The third action to be taken by the project manager is the use of strong project management practices. Project management practices are composed of project methodologies, tools, and techniques that the project manager uses to initiate, plan, execute, control, and deliver the project. Each organization may have its own preference on a specific methodology and may also create a set of documents to be used by the project manager and her team.

There are many good project management practices to choose from. The project manager must select the ones that are suitable for the project in question and those that are suitable for the type of the organization in which the project is being undertaken. For example, for a strong functional organization a good project management practice to mitigate and as well as manage conflicts can be

the creation of a matrix of responsibility. Stating who does what and when will most likely keep conflict out of a project. If not, the project manager can always refer to the matrix of responsibility to deal with that conflict and the parties.

But what happens when a conflict has escalated and it is jeopardizing the team members' relationship, the project manager's reputation, or most importantly the project and the project sponsoring organization's needs on undertaking that project? The answer is simple: when that happens, the project manager needs to act with a collaborative approach toward the parties in conflict to separate the people from the problem. And the best approach is incorporating the mediation process in the project and having the project manager address the conflict and the people in conflict the way a mediator approaches parties in dispute.