Four Strategies for Preventing Toxic Team Conflict

No matter how smart, stellar, or successful your team may be, conflicts are unavoidable. Some of these are natural conflicts – disagreements on perspective and viewpoint. Others can fester and become infected with resentment and jealousy. Every team is made better by the give-and-take between its members. It's the lingering, toxic conflict that you want to preempt and avoid.

This tool shares four strategies to preempt toxic conflict and build positive team interactions.

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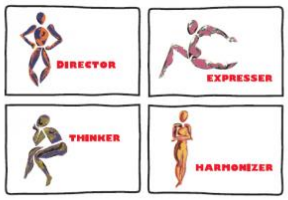
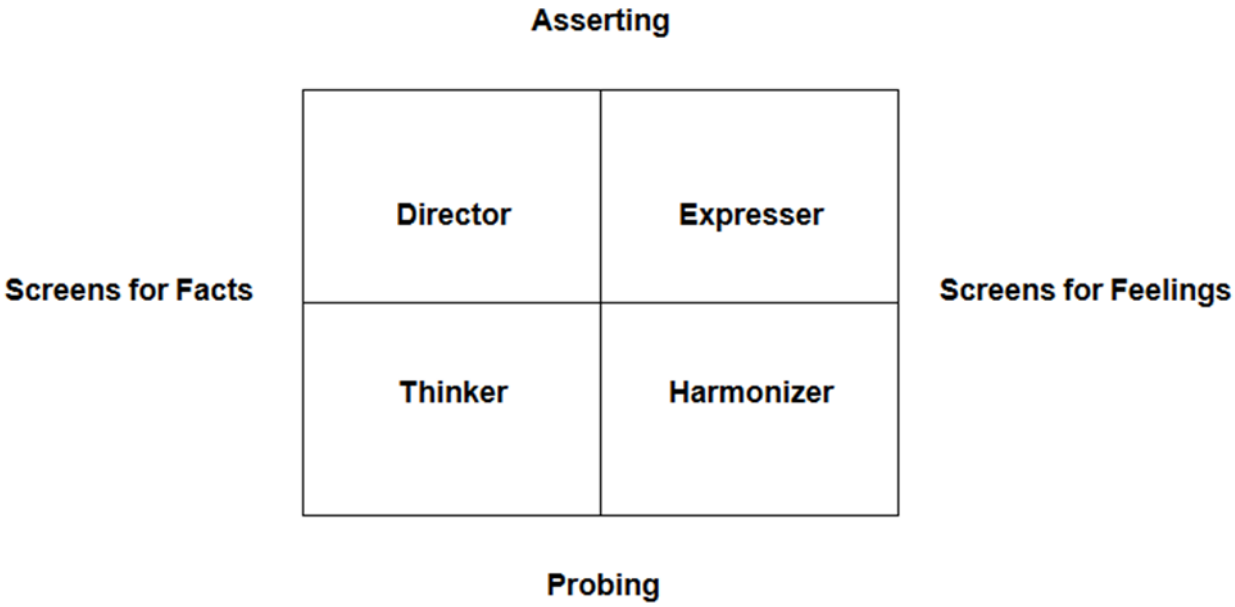
1. We all have **natural differences** in the way we think and communicate.

We use the term "communication style" to describe this complex mélange of how we process information and respond.



- Some people focus first on the task;
- Some people are more focused on feelings;
- Some individuals are highly assertive; others less so.

The Straight Talk® book helps people understand and appreciate the nuances.



In a team environment...

- **Directors** tendency to make abrupt decisions may not be well received by those, specifically Expresser or Harmonizer team members, who wish to discuss a point or issue in detail.

- **Expressers** may have too many ideas and be too loquacious, lack clear priorities, and have difficulty following through. It can be hard for them to relate to people who are quiet and analytical i.e. with Thinkers.

- **Thinkers** can tend to be linear in their thinking, sometimes unwilling to take risks, may miss deadlines and may be blind to the big picture. This can be challenging in a team when there are Director-style personalities.

- **Harmonizers** often avoid conflict and are resistant to change, make decisions slowly, and may not be clear about their goals. They are most likely to experience conflicts with Directors.

No one communication style is right or wrong, good or bad. The key to avoiding toxic conflict is to raise the level of understanding and appreciation about the different styles of your team. You can't let differences in style become a barrier. Instead, you need to model and encourage patience, understanding, listening, and appreciation. This is the first step in laying a solid foundation for avoiding toxic conflict.

As a leader or manager...

It's helpful to have positive ways to frame each style. In order to do that, leaders need to understand and appreciate the assumptions of each style:

Director Teams	Expresser Teams
▪ Action is better than inaction. ▪ We should act more quickly. ▪ We should reward bold decisions.	▪ Every idea is worth considering. ▪ People should be willing to try once. ▪ We should reward creativity.
Thinker Teams	**Harmonizer Teams**
▪ Analysis can solve any problem. ▪ A right–and wrong– way to do things. ▪ Reward people who do things right.	▪ Good relationships are essential. ▪ Don't argue, seek to understand. ▪ Reward those who work well together.

As you might guess, different styles work best in different situations. Ultimately, your role as a leader should be to guide the team toward a balanced style. If a team is paralyzed by indecision, then injecting more people with the Expresser or Director style will get them moving. If a group is acting too quickly, a Thinker or Harmonizer style should be added to the mix.

Exercise

In the box below, make note of the potential strengths and shortcomings of your team, based on your understanding of its members' styles. Then note 1-3 strategies to mitigate the weaknesses.

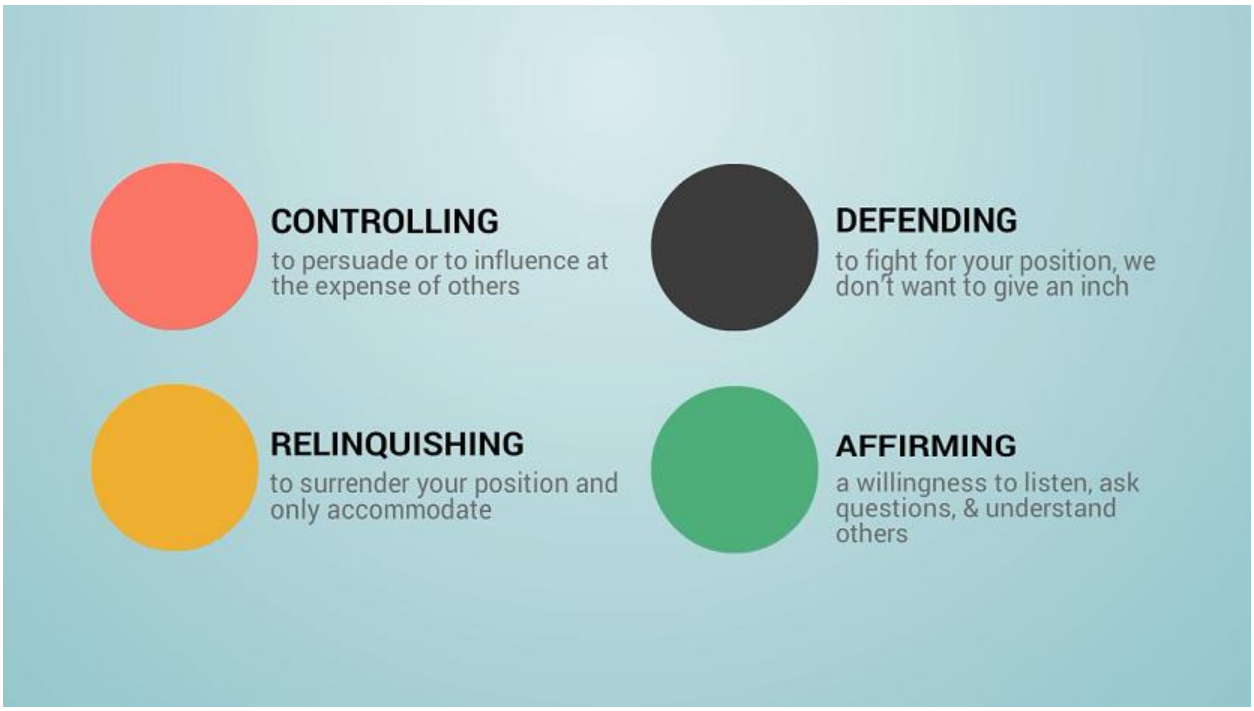
Potential strengths of the team	Potential weaknesses of the team
1-3 strategies to mitigate the potential weaknesses of the team	

Tip: Create a team profile at *GoStraightTalk.com* and invite your co-workers. You will discover their style and receive specific tips to improve your communication.

2. The second strategy is to focus on **appreciating intentions** when we communicate – and avoid the type of intention that can lead to toxicity.

Intent is always the first thing people hear. If it is a positive intent, it sets the stage for productive communication. If it is negative, it can overwhelm everything that is said and make words meaningless. You set the tone with your intent.

There are four types of intentions that one can experience:



To be able to communicate effectively, we need to have an ***affirming*** intent. It's reflected in a willingness to listen, to ask questions, to understand other peoples' points of view. It paves the way for the open sharing of ideas. When we affirm, we allow space for other peoples' ideas and knowledge to surface.

There are three other forms of intent. We use them as strategies to try to get things our way. The first is a ***controlling*** intent. When we have a controlling intent, our purpose is to persuade or to influence at the expense of other peoples' points of view. There is little opportunity for sharing of ideas.

When we ***relinquish***, we surrender our position. We stop participating and only accommodate. At some level it is passive-aggressive communication – it's a way of saying, "I'm taking my marbles and going home." Relinquishing often occurs when we are matched up against a controlling intent.

When we ***defend***, our intent is to fight for our position. We don't want to give an inch. A controlling intent against a defending one can escalate into real conflict.

Which of these forms of intent do you see most? How much more productive would your culture be if everyone used an affirming intent?

Affirming intention

- "Help me understand?"
- "What led you to that conclusion?"

You display it by affirming the value of what other people say and, at the same time, clearly communicating your own point. Affirming is done using inquiry.

Defending intention

- "That's not what I meant."
- "You didn't hear me correctly."
- "That's not what I said."

As soon as defensiveness creeps in, people are on emotional alert, and they become guarded and feel unsafe – a poor environment in which to build a team; one that can lead to unproductive behavior.

Controlling intention

- "Why did you do this?"
- "Why did you do that?"
- "Next time, you should do this…"

You'll recognize it when people are nit-picky and micromanaging. If abused, a controlling intention will lead to resentment and team dysfunction.

Relinquishing intention

- "Whatever you want to do is fine with me."
- "I'm taking my marbles and going home."

It signals that the person has stopped caring and is no longer a full participant in the team. This can quickly degenerate into toxic conflict.

What aspects of communication reflect an affirming intent?

- Asking open-ended questions.
- Showing genuine interest in my views.
- A moderate tone of voice.
- Friendly body language.
- Respect.

Bottom line: Intention matters, and affirming intent is the most effective. People who exercise genuine inquiry, listen intently, and create a safe environment for others to express their views are going to be the most effective team members.

3. The third strategy is to **establish ground rules** for your team.

If everyone were a master communicator – incapable of distorting the facts, clear about their own motives, able to accept responsibility to see each perspective clearly – then perhaps ground rules would not be necessary. But no one is a perfect communicator. Even the best communicators fall into traps and pitfalls.

Ground rules are the guardrails that guide a strategic conversation safely home. They set a clear standard for productive behavior and communication.

Ground rules should include things like encouraging equal talk time, asking people to balance advocacy and inquiry, showing respect for different points of view, and avoiding groupthink.

The following ground rules have proven successful time after time. Each ground rule points to one of the tools or skills embodied in straight talk.

1. Understand each other's styles
2. Agree on the meaning of keywords
3. Tackle issues, not people
4. Permit one speaker at a time (no side conversations)
5. Bring issues to the table (no "backroom" discussions)
6. Keep discussions focused
7. Explain the reasoning leading to your conclusions
8. Invite inquiry into your views
9. Inquire into the reasoning of others
10. Make "undiscussable" ideas discussable
11. Identify missing data

You can learn more about ground rules at CommunicationStyles.org on Setting Ground Rules, When Ground Rules Aren't Enough, and The Eleven Ground Rules.

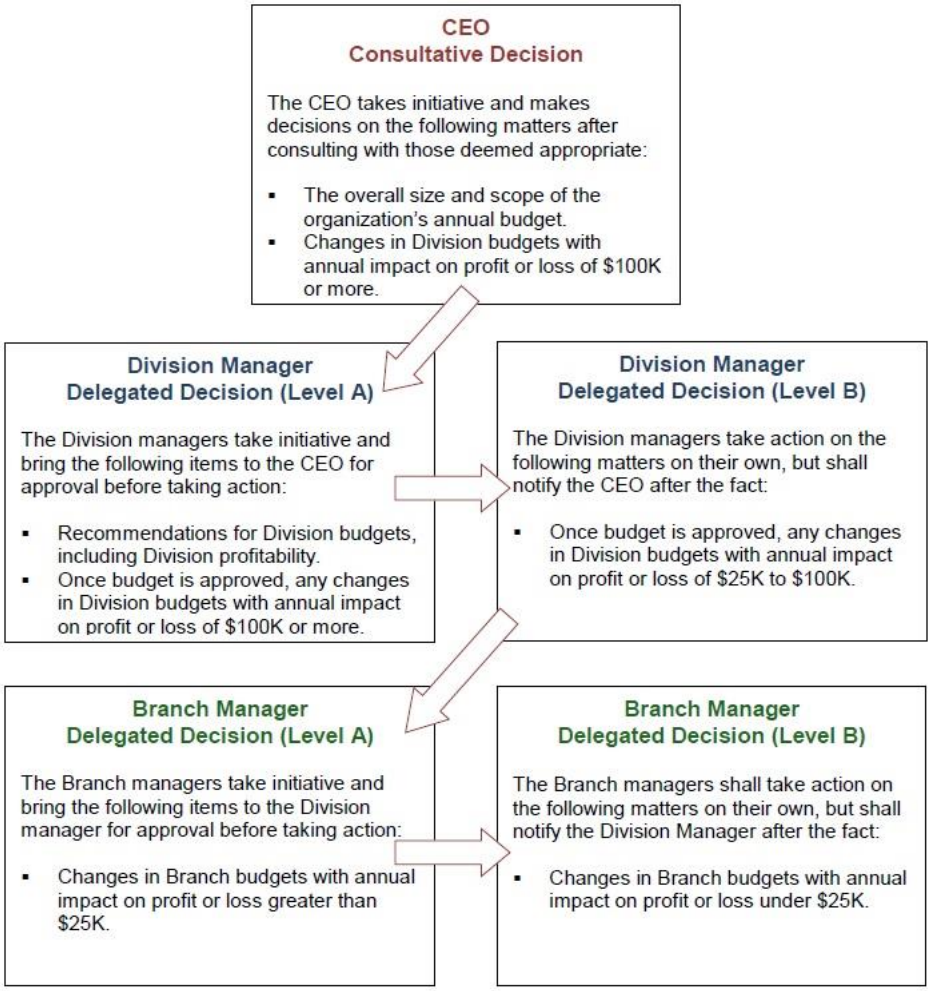
4. Finally, be **clear about decision making roles** on and outside the team.

Make sure in advance that everyone is on the same page in terms of how issues will be decided and that can preempt a lot of toxic conflicts.

- Will your team operate on the basis of consensus?
- Will you take votes and operate democratically?
- Will you operate consultatively, where the team's input feeds into a decision made by one person?

The important thing is to be clear about it and then to follow through – people don't like having one set of rules in place, only to suddenly find the rules have been changed.

If, for instance, you've established that decisions need to be reached by consensus, your team must work through the decision until you reach an agreement. You can't suddenly decide one person will make the decision.



***Tip**: Check out "The Art of Managing Decisions" video course at Leading-Resources.com to get everyone using the same vocabulary of decision-making for delegation processes.*

Conclusion

At the root of all toxic conflict is a lack of **trust**. The strategies described here are all designed to build understanding and trust. If you use them, you'll be a much more effective team member and team leader.

***Tip**: Check out The Leadership Equation blog at LeadershipCulture.com highlighting the "10 Best Practices That Build Trust, Spark Innovation, and Create High-Performing Organizations."*