

THE LIVING BUILDING

Acknowledging Conflict & Moving Forward



On September 18, 2015, Georgia Tech received a \$30 million commitment from The Kendeda Fund to build what everyone hopes will become the first Living Building Challenge 3.1 certified education and research facility in the Southeast. A certified Living Building must take into account issues involving place, water, energy, health and happiness, materials, equity, and beauty. Ultimately, it needs to be sustainable and self-sufficient, producing more energy than it uses while acting as a regenerative space that connects its occupants to light, air, nature, and community.

»» Planning & Constructing

Planning and constructing such a project can be a challenge, especially when it involves the interests of multiple people who have different ideas about how to meet some of the world's strictest standards in building and performance. Rather than settling on an idea right away, the team involved in the Living Building had lengthy discussions about its design possibilities and held an ideas competition between three groups of architects, engineers, and landscape artists to get a better sense of what their project could become. After choosing Lord Aeck Sargent and The Miller Hull Partnership to design the building, the team then had to balance questions about form, function, and cost in order to produce a schematic on which everyone agreed. After two years of planning, the construction phase of the project began on November 2, 2017, and it is scheduled for completion in May 2019.

All team projects, whether big or small, have moments when people disagree about the way that work is done, resulting in what is known as procedural conflict. Teams that don't address these conflicts may become disorganized or even become unable to complete their work. But, as the Living Building demonstrates, teams can employ strategies to acknowledge conflict and then keep the project moving forward. Effective teams consist of individuals who reflect on potential avenues of conflict and then work on negotiating ways to create a shared vision of their project. The following activity will help your team members to assess your conflict management styles, recognize potential triggers for procedural conflict, and provide ways to apply this knowledge for a successful project.

As a Team:

»» Step 1: Complete Conflict Management Style Survey

To better understand your conflict management style, take 5 minutes to complete the conflict management styles survey that your professor has provided as an Excel file.*

*If your professor did not provide you with a file for assessing your conflict management style, you can find a similar survey at <http://www.ofis.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Conflict-Management-Assessment-2011.pdf>.

The survey will ask you to answer 20 questions about how you generally work in a team. For each question, respond with a score using this scale: 4 - Always 3 - Often 2 - Sometimes 1 - Rarely

Complete the survey on your own. Then, go to the "styles" tab of the sheet and review the box that says "your conflict management style." Finally, review the advantages and drawbacks associated with the 5 conflict management styles, described below:

- Competing - Assertive and determined. Useful for time-sensitive decisions or inexperienced team members. Potentially disregards the needs of others and ignores complexity.
- Collaborative - Attempts to satisfy all parties through win-win solutions. Useful for complex, big-picture issues. Potentially over-complicates simple problems.
- Compromise - Attempts to find a middle ground through mutual sacrifices. Useful for mutually exclusive decisions and temporary solutions. Potentially won't be useful in teams with varied expertise or status.
- Avoiding - Unassertive, shies away from issues. Useful for minor issues or difficult moments of conflict. Potentially leads to resolutions not being achieved or to unfulfillment of the avoider's needs.
- Accommodating - Obliges the wishes of others and emphasizes similarities. Useful for promoting exchange and preserving relationships. Potentially ignores issues that are personally important to a team member.

Please note that no one style is superior and that each style has its advantages and drawbacks.

»» Step 2: Discuss Findings

Now that you have completed the survey, discuss your findings as a group for 10 minutes. Consider the following questions:

1. Do you find the survey's assessment of your style to be accurate? Why or why not? Do people in your group tend to change their conflict management style depending on different situations?
2. How do the styles in your group map out? Do your group members tend to be more cooperative, more assertive, or somewhere in the middle?
3. How can your group make sure that everyone's voices are heard and your opinions are valued, especially if you have very different styles?
 - a. For example, if you have someone with a competing style and someone with an avoiding style, how can you make sure that the avoider doesn't get steamrolled during discussions?
4. How can each of you leverage your conflict management styles to ensure that the group succeeds?
 - a. For this question, develop at least one actionable goal per team member and add them to your team contract or project plan.

»» Step 3: Reflect on Procedural Conflict Issues

Now that your group better understands your conflict management styles, you will reflect on some common issues that can lead to procedural conflict. On your own, take 5 minutes to answer the following questions. Be prepared to discuss your answers with the group.

1. What are the individual responsibilities of each group member, including you?
2. What does your team need to know about you when scheduling meetings and establishing deadlines?
3. What pace do you think the work should take? For example, how soon prior to the due date should the assignment be complete?



4. How much time do you think you should each devote to the project every day?

5. What kind of quality do you expect for your team's project? What grade are you working towards? Is having the "best" project important to you?

»» Step 4: Discuss Findings and Update the Team Contract

Discuss your findings with the group for 10 minutes.

If some of you disagree about responsibilities, scheduling, pace, time, or quality, this is the time to discuss and negotiate everyone's expectations. This would also be a good time to raise other concerns that you have about your team and the way that you are completing your project.

This will promote substantive conflict, which is an active and productive discussion involving different perspectives or ideas relating to the outcome of a project. The point here is to synthesize everyone's ideas and figure out a way to move forward with the project.

During this discussion, be mindful of your conflict management style as well as those of your teammates. Also, practice active listening and avoid interrupting your teammates when they are speaking. Employ empathetic and strategic language cues during the discussion, including the following techniques:

1. Acknowledgments ('yes, I understand')
2. Reinforcing and clarifying comments ('tell me more about that')
3. Ask for feedback ('Are there other ways to approach this problem?')
4. Build on common ground ('X raises a good point there. Based on that, let's do Y')

As your group discusses your findings and comes to agreements about responsibilities, scheduling, pace, time, and quality, update your team contract with specific details for your future reference.

»» Step 5: Apply What You've Learned to a Project Issue

Now that your team has a better understanding of your conflict styles and how to manage procedural conflict, apply what you've learned to discussing an important issue that relates to the success of your project.

Take 10 minutes to discuss an issue that falls into one of the following categories:

1. Context - What's the situation or occasion for the project?
2. Purpose - What are the goals and objectives of the project?
3. Audience - Who is the project for?
4. Organization - How is the project arranged?
5. Development - What kind of support or research does the project need?
6. Design - What decisions need to be made about typography, visuals, layout, etc.?
7. Conventions - What kinds of expectations exist for the project in terms of genre, form, etc.?
8. Usability - How do we know the project is successful?

As you discuss the issue, make a game plan about how to move forward based on the discussion. Develop at least 2 actionable tasks so that you will get from conflict to producing the necessary work for your project. Add these tasks to your team contract.

Some issues merit substantive conflict and others don't - knowing this depends on what your team members value. So, if it's clear that someone considers an issue to be important (whether it's a major or minor aspect of the project), acknowledge that as a team.

Expanded Discussion

Step 6: Discuss Your Strengths

Think about how your CliftonStrengths relate to procedural and substance conflict in your group. To review your CliftonStrengths, refer to the 'Theme Insight Cards' document (Furman University) that is available on your course canvas portal or on the ETD website.

1. How do the conflict management styles of your team members match up with your knowledge and skills and the 'loves' associated with your CliftonStrengths?
2. How do your CliftonStrengths 'barrier labels' relate to conflicts that your group has had so far (or might have in the future), and how can you work to resolve this?

Conflict can occur not only due to procedural issues and conflict management styles but also as a result of disagreements that stem from team members' personal beliefs, values, and potential prejudices about politics, age, class, race, religion, nationality, and so on. This is known as affective conflict.

1. To better understand your own potential biases, visit Project Implicit (<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/selectatest.html>) and take one or more of their tests.

a. For example, if your team is of mixed genders, the gender-career IAT may provide useful insight on some of your own deep assumptions.

b. You do not have to discuss these results with your team. Instead, think about ways that you can move forward with this knowledge. Specifically, be mindful about your own internalized assumptions about particular groups.

2. Have a 5 minute discussion as a team in which you reflect on how your different nationalities, races, genders, and other aspects of diversity affect your individual expectations about interpersonal interaction, personal space, leadership styles, and team structure.

