

## **Summary notes lunch seminar May 16, 2007 “IT Conflict Management: More than the sum of tasks”**

This document contains a summary of comments made during a Plutonic Zoo lunch seminar at May 16, 2007. The attendees enjoyed two keynote speeches and a spirited debate to which most contributed.

From the feedback received we learned that the topic, information shared, and experiences discussed were highly relevant in today’s work environment and that the seminar was highly appreciated. The summary notes below focus on practical ideas to manage and resolve conflicts within the IT department, between IT and the rest of the business, and with external vendors.

Each item below has a story behind them. If you want to follow up on any of the summary comments made, or if you are currently in a situation that requires input on conflict management, please contact Plutonic Zoo and we will be happy to explore options with you.

### **1. Conflict is inevitable and important**

- Conflict shows people care about the outcome, and feel empowered to change things. A lack of conflict can indicate that people have become apathic and are no longer contributing.
- The people you work with will have different backgrounds, interests, perspectives, paradigms, and values. An effective group process takes advantage of this in decision making. A lack of this diversity can result in ‘groupthink’ (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Groupthink>).
- Conflict can be constructive in a culture of collaboration and empowerment, which values diversity to reach a common outcome, and avoids fear.

### **2. Achieving takes more than the sum of the tasks**

- The traditional focus of IT project managers on tasks, roles, functions, timelines, and budget under-emphasises the importance of communication and the need to form effective relationships with all stakeholders.
- Younger staff (generations X and Y) are more motivated and inspired by detailed communication about the reasons why they are working on objectives, based on mutual respect, than by roles and timelines.
- IT projects are not an end in themselves, but a contribution towards a business goal. Understanding the business background, motivations and desired outcome from the viewpoint of everyone impacted is crucial for successful projects.
- Cross-functional involvement in project teams can improve the outcome, e.g. a project manager from the user community managing an IT project, and assignments and job rotation across lines of business.

### **3. Effective communication**

- Bridging paradigms within a team requires negotiation based on mutual recognition. Effective negotiation starts with finding common ground, building through creative exploration of differences, and letting go of the 'I am right' attitude.
- Every interaction between project stakeholders will set or change expectations on requirements for follow up and the final outcome. Managing expectations and meeting them is therefore an ongoing task to avoid surprises.
- Avoid assumptions. Ask yourself what are you assuming and ensure explicit communication of any expectation by yourself or another stakeholder. Clarify and confirm by feeding back what you have assumed and understood.
- Ensure communication takes place between all stakeholders, to foster understanding and acceptance of the (limitations of) capabilities of vendors, the IT department, and the users. Be open and honest – fight fear.
- Communication through questions and answers is most effective to avoid a perception of 'throwing issues over the fence' and hoping you will be understood is not a strategy. Communication is 2-way (dialogue) and requires listening too.
- 'Why'-questions, as in 'why is that important to you' are an effective way to bridge paradigms. Dare to keep asking 'why' to delve deeper, because:
- 'Common sense' is not common, especially when it involves 'business-as-usual' information to an outsider. Be comfortable stating the obvious and/or asking for something that may be obvious to someone else. A question is not dumb if the answer is unknown.
- Ensure you can walk in the shoes of the listeners before talking.
- Listen to project participants. Research shows that 90% of people in IT projects see failure coming – few of them are managers.
- Focus on the emotional state of stakeholders, since communication is 93% non-verbal: 65% body language, 28% intonation, 7% content.

### **4. Managing conflict**

- The earlier differences and problems are discussed and managed, the better the outcome. Don't think small problems will go away by themselves; they tend to grow and fester, whether visible or not. Managing them early shows leadership.
- Asking for and giving feedback, both positive and constructive criticism, will improve performance.
- Measuring performance and making it public creates an instinctive desire to improve.
- Recognising when you need help in conflict management is a sign of strength and maturity. An external trusted perspective without emotional involvement can uncover critical issues and hidden tensions, and provide objectivity.