

## PM WORLD TODAY – VIEWPOINTS – APRIL 2009

Championship Teams Don't Waste Time!  
Fear of Conflict

*By Tom Sheives, PhD, PMP*

An amazing amount of time is wasted in fear. We experience personal periods of time lost to fear where we are paralyzed, unable to move forward for fear of what might happen. The status quo just seems more comfortable, even if elements of that condition are very uncomfortable indeed.

A sports team can lose valuable seconds in a clutch play if team members are hesitant, fearful to step out and act decisively. Business teams are the same way. Precious time is wasted when team members grumble in isolation and confusion because of fear of reprisal for pursuing a novel path or method. No one on the dysfunctional team questions the status quo or the directives of the team leader. Not only is valuable team time wasted, but innovative team ideas are suppressed.

In contrast, championship teams don't waste time with fear of conflict; they are, instead actively engaged in productive conflict. In Patrick Lencioni's insightful book titled "The Five Dysfunctions of a Team," he contends that the second dysfunction impeding championship performance is fear of conflict among team members. Is conflict a bad thing in teams? It depends on how it is defined. Relative to literature, conflict is described as "plot tension" or opposition between or among characters or forces that shapes or motivates the action of plot.

Championship teams strive for the element of "plot tension." They want the differences or the disagreement to result in some action "in a productive way" for the benefit of the team. What happens on a team when "plot tension" is not the norm? The results are a series of endless, boring team meetings where only the team leader talks while everyone nods in agreement without thinking. There are personal attacks, behind the back politics, omitted critical discussions, silent team members, and above all, vastly wasted time and energy with posturing and interpersonal risk management.

A champion leader that heads up a championship team must not avoid conflict. In fact, the leader must encourage healthy conflict. Leaders need to recognize conflict when it occurs and remind the team, during the conflict engagement, that conflict is good and healthy. Leaders need to model conflict encounters by staying away from personal attacks, and team members must follow.

It is noteworthy that this second characteristic of Lencioni's dysfunctional team model is the FEAR of CONFLICT, not the PRESENCE of CONFLICT. The difference is discernable by the presence of "artificial harmony" in a dysfunctional team. Team members seem to step all over one another to be in agreement, but no new ideas are presented and no productive questioning occurs. After the team meeting, destructive team behaviors resume, including personal attacks, disgruntled sarcasm, and team politics. Time is wasted, performance is diminished, and the results at the bottom line are stagnant.

A championship team actively invests time and energy in healthy, productive conflict. Precious time is saved when artificial harmony is cast aside and destructive team behaviors are cast out. Time becomes a key element of championship performance, with everyone focused on team results. Therefore, if are observing slowness or hesitancy in team movements, stop and take action! It may very well be that you and your team are not experiencing enough productive conflict.

## About the Author:

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**Tom Sheives**, PhD, PMP, is president, project consultant, coach and author with his company Better Project Results, Inc. His mission is to "Get Project Teams and Management Teams *unstuck!*" Tom has enabled organizations worldwide to achieve better project results, working with companies such as Microsoft, the Panama Canal Authority, Texas Instruments, Lockheed Martin and others. He has written and delivered training programs for High Performing Teams, Leadership, Project Management Professional (PMP) certification, Fundamentals and Advanced Topics in Project Management. He has also delivered a widely acclaimed project management simulation program. In his recent book, *OPPORTUNITY unstuck!*, Tom presents 4 Golden Keys to unlock your right time, right place, and right opportunity. Tom had a notable recent assignment with the faculty of The University of Texas at Dallas, where he delivered 56 days of project management training to 175 executives of the Panama Canal Authority, helping prepare them for the current \$5.25 billion expansion program. The 4 Golden Keys were implemented successfully in the Panama training project. As a graduate of Coach University, he is trained to deliver High Performing Project Team Workshops, Project Team Assessments, Leadership Practices Inventory – 360°, the Winslow Dynamics Profile (Behavioral) Assessment, and the Personal Coaching Styles Inventory. Tom is a graduate of the University of New Mexico, Texas A&M University, Baylor University and Coach U, all in the USA. He is on the board of the Fort Worth Chapter of PMI and is a member of the IEEE. His company, Better Project Results, Inc., is a Registered Education Provider for the Project Management Institute (PMI). Tom serves as an International Correspondent for PMForum and *PM World Today*. He resides in Texas and can be contacted at [tom@BetterProjectResults.com](mailto:tom@BetterProjectResults.com).