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Too Hot To Handle?
How to Manage Relationship Conflict

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E ncouraging senior executives to work as a team has been suggested as a way of enhancing leadership effectiveness in today's complex organizations. A number of management scholars and practitioners have argued that teamwork at the top promotes better decision making and increases the involvement and commitment of key executives.[1] At the same time, considerable research and anecdotal evidence suggest that senior teams find teamwork difficult.[2] The competing viewpoints that promote sound decision making also lead naturally to conflicts that waste precious time and erode interpersonal relationships. Indeed, when substantial conflicts erupt in management teams, dysfunctional group dynamics followed by frustration and flawed decisions may be the rule rather than the exception. Clearly, realizing the promise of teamwork at the top requires finding ways to help management teams deal constructively with tough conflicts.

Prior work has advised management teams facing conflict to focus on the substance (the "task") and to steer clear of relationship issues. *Task conflict*, some researchers argue, can be resolved by recourse to facts and logic, whereas *relationship conflict* turns into unproductive personal attacks and emotional confrontations. Task conflict is conceptualized as differences in opinion relating to work or business decisions, while relationship conflict pertains to personality differences and interpersonal tensions.[3] These researchers propose that teams

engaging in frequent task conflict will perform well, while teams caught up in relationship conflict will suffer, and so the latter should be avoided.[4]

This advice makes sense under certain conditions. First, the task conflict must not trigger opposing values, interests, or belief systems in the team. For example, if some executives believe that good design sells products while others believe that customers are primarily motivated by price, a conflict that pits design against price triggers these opposing beliefs. The second condition is met if careful analysis of facts, such as financial data or engineering tests, can reduce or eliminate key uncertainties that support different options. Third, the stakes should be low or only moderately high. These "cool topics" can be addressed by debating the facts, with little risk of giving rise to heated disagreement. There-fore, for cool topics, the advice to steer clear of relationship conflict is feasible and sensible. In these cases, especially when leaders emphasize shared goals and good communication, teams can process conflicts effectively.[5]

In contrast, "hot topics" call for a different approach. Hot topics in man-agement teams are those for which

- differing (usually taken-for-granted) values, belief systems, or interests shape individuals' points of view;

- relevant uncertainties surrounding the topic or decision cannot be reduced by a review of the available facts;[6] and

- stakes are high.

Under these conditions, relationship conflict has an annoying habit of showing up uninvited, *despite* managers' best efforts to avoid it. This is because of the way the human mind works.

Behavioral research has shown that people spontaneously attribute unflattering motives, traits, or abilities to those who disagree—and persist in disagreeing—with our strongly held views.[7] One's own views seem so "right" that others' disagreement seems downright disagreeable (and intentionally so). Two cognitive mechanisms identified by psychologist Lee Ross and his colleagues help explain why this happens. First, people tend to see their own views as more common than they really are, leading them to assume (falsely) that others share their views—the *false consensus effect*.[8] This assumption creates problems when unex-pectedly refuted, as in the course of a dis-agreement. Unfortunately, this is usually an unpleasant rather than pleasant sur-prise, due to a second mechanism, *naïve realism*—a person's "unshakable conviction that he or she is somehow privy to an invariant, knowable, objective reality—a reality that *others* will also perceive faithfully, provided that they are reasonable and rational." So, when others mis-perceive that "reality," we conclude that it must be because they view the world through a "prism of self-interest, ideological bias, or personal perversity."[9] When

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TABLE 1. Contrasting Cool and Hot Topics

	Cool Topics	**Hot Topics**
Data	Accessible, relatively objective, conducive to testing of different interpretations	Controversial and/or inaccessible, interpretation highly subjective, different interpretations hard to test
Level of Certainty	High*	Moderate to low
Stakes	Low to moderate	High
Goals	Largely shared	Differ based on deeply held beliefs, values, or interests
Discussion	Reasonable, fact-based, collegial	Often emotional, lack of agreement about which facts matter and what they mean, veiled personal attacks likely

* High certainty situations involve present actualities or near-term possibilities that can be illuminated relatively easily through facts and analyses. Low certainty situations involve more distant or future possibilities for which facts don't yet exist, only inferences.

these well-documented cognitive tendencies get applied to the problem of discussing a conflict on a hot topic in a management team, major challenges lie ahead.

When heated business debates trigger relationship conflict, individual managers usually consider two alternatives, each of them unattractive: silence one's views to preserve relationships and make progress; or voice them, risking emotionally charged discussions that erode relationships and harm progress. Our intervention research, building on Chris Argyris and Donald Schön's pioneering work in organizational learning, suggests that neither choice produces effective team discussions.[10] First, silencing is often ineffective. The negative emotional reactions embedded in people's attributions typically leak out through tones of voice or veiled criticisms, distorting the substantive conversation and intensifying relationship tensions. Worse, the emotions often inspire political maneuvers that undo whatever "consensus" teams may reach at the decision-making table. Second, although relationship conflict is usually handled poorly, we have found that it is possible to learn how to handle it well.

Teams that *effectively* discuss the charged relationship dynamics that surface when discussing hot topics can take better advantage of the potential of teamwork than if they avoid these discussions. Our distinction between cool and hot topics can help managers recognize situations in which avoiding relationship conflicts will be challenging and perhaps even unwise.[11] As summarized in Table 1, hot topics are relatively easy to recognize, and managing them is challenging but not impossible. As Mary Parker Follett suggested years ago, given that we can't avoid conflict, we might as well put it to good use.[12] While this is easier said than done, specific practices can help management teams put conflict, including relationship conflict, "to good use."

Research Base

Over the past two decades, we have studied and helped management teams facing conflicts related to critical business issues. Amy Edmondson has investigated why some teams handle conflict in ways that further innovation and organizational learning while other teams fall behind. Diana Smith, through longitudinal intervention research, has helped executives work with their most intractable conflicts, strengthening interpersonal relationships in the team along the way. Together, we engaged in an in-depth longitudinal study of one senior management team in a firm we refer to as "Elite Systems." In all, we have studied dozens of management teams and analyzed thousands of pages of transcripts encompassing hundreds of conflicts, in the tradition of "action science" (research designed to develop and test strategies for action).[13] These experiences have led us to two observations. First, when management team conflicts encompass opposing values or interests that are deeply held, relationship conflicts are virtually inevitable. Second, management teams—with guidance and practice—can learn to handle relationship conflicts effectively.

This article integrates our own field research with prior work on organizational learning and social cognition to show how hot topics trigger relationship conflict and how most teams respond once it does. Drawing from cognitive research, we describe the existence of "cool" and "hot" thought processes; drawing from our data, we illustrate how these different systems affect management teams, inspiring our distinction between hot and cool topics. In particular, we show how the management team at Elite Systems struggled with a hot topic that triggered both task and relationship conflict, and then how, with intervention, they became more able to engage *both* types of conflict productively.

Our analyses first reviewed verbatim data from interviews and meetings to identify attitudes and behaviors that made relationship conflict discussable, deepened understanding of issues, and promoted integration and synthesis of differences. We then grouped these behaviors into three categories, which we refer to as "practices"; each practice encompasses a set of actions, behaviors, and attitudes. We illustrate these practices with data from Elite's and three other management teams—in another manufacturing company, a professional services firm, and a pharmaceutical company.

When Conflict Gets Personal

Starting with the best of intentions and steeped in the relevant facts, executives seeking to exploit the advantages of teamwork often encounter conflicts that derail collaboration. Consider a conflict that broke out at Elite Systems, a manufacturer of high-end office equipment for home and business markets.[14]

Conflict in Elite's Strategy Team

Eight senior managers, including the CEO, gathered in a series of meetings to rethink their corporate strategy in the face of the firm's deteriorating

financial performance. At one session, two executives almost came to blows: Ian McAlister, the head of Elite's struggling core business, and Frank Adams, the president of a small, successful subsidiary with less-expensive product lines.

Adams opened the discussion. "We face a fundamental problem," he announced, looking directly at McAlister. "For three years, we've sunk an enormous amount of money into turning around *your* [Elite's core] business, but the dropping revenues show it's not working. I'm worried we're sinking more and more money into a business with no clear strategy for approaching today's market. My research shows that growth is clearly at the low end of the market—which is why our subsidiary had such a tremendous year and why your business is doing nothing but losing ground."

As the rest of the group held its collective breath, McAlister straightened in his chair and turned to face Adams. "From *your* point of view maybe," he said. "But with the same information, I would go in a very different direction. I know we can't sell the same way to our core segment as we have in the past. I know we've got to do something different. But, we *can* grow if our products are attractive. We don't need the market to grow for *us* to grow. Besides, a year ago, we made a conscious choice to invest in the core business and those investments haven't paid off yet."

With these two opening statements, Adams and McAlister set the terms of the debate. To Adams, the data unequivocally "showed" that the core business was in fundamental trouble; after all, the lower end of the market was growing. It was "obvious," but not to McAlister. He accepted Adams's data, but he rejected his conclusion. To McAlister, his view was equally obvious: you don't need the *market* to grow. If your products are attractive enough, you can expand market share. Looking at the very same data, the two executives arrived at very different conclusions about how to deal with an uncertain future full of risk. As McAlister soon exclaimed in frustration: "I don't dispute the facts, but it doesn't follow from the facts that we should abandon the high end!"

Dynamics of Hot Topics

Our analysis of transcript data has identified three patterns that occur when executive teams debate hot topics. First, people start to repeat the same points over and over again. For example, at Elite, Adams continued to argue in various ways that it wasn't a good idea "to keep throwing money" at the core business. McAlister never disputed Adams's facts, but he countered his conclusions at every turn—and always with some version of the same argument: We "invested heavily in this business because we thought our products were strong enough to sustain growth, and those recent investments haven't paid off yet." In a matter of minutes, they found themselves at an impasse where each manager's only recourse was to repeat his own position.

Second, as soon as a team reaches a substantive impasse, the discussion starts to "get personal." In the Elite case, interviews showed that Adams wondered privately, as did McAlister, why the other *insisted* on taking such obviously wrong-headed views and *persisted* in holding them despite "rational" arguments

that so obviously refuted them. In the meeting, they would speculate (privately) about each other's motives (e.g., *Is he just pushing his self-interest? Is he afraid of admitting a mistake?)* This led quickly to silent attributions about the other's character or abilities; (*Is he closed-minded? Incompetent? Or just plain stupid?)* Whether blaming motives, character, or abilities, each individual is silently blaming the other (or others) for the team's impasse. Another well-documented cognitive tendency, the *fundamental attribution error,* helps explain why. Ross showed that people attribute others' behavior overwhelmingly to dispositional causes (those based on personality or motives), ignoring even powerful situational causes.[15] This cognitive tendency can lead managers to attribute the behavior they observe in others while discussing a hot topic—say, persistence or a frustrated tone of voice—to others' motives or character rather than to difficulties of the situation (say, the challenges involved in discussing a complex, uncertain, high-stakes topic with people who hold different beliefs about it.) Our research also suggests that, in these situations, virtually no one entertains the possibility that their own behavior may be one of the situational pressures contributing to the other's behavior.

Third, once a task conflict sparks negative interpersonal attributions, emotions take center stage and substantive progress slows to a standstill. At this point, people may openly blame the failures on their colleagues. At Elite, Adams eventually threw up his hands and declared to the group in exasperation, "It sounds to me like Ian is trying to take certain decisions off the table!" At a loss for what to do, another manager cracked a joke and the group switched topics.

Given these dynamics, it is easy to understand why managers would *want* to avoid relationship conflict. The problem is that it's hard to do. Everyone on Elite's management team, including Adams and McAlister, was trying to avoid what happened; they even had market data they had expected would help adjudicate their differences. They ran into difficulty—not for lack of trying or for lack of data—but because their different beliefs systems led them to focus on different data, to discount each other's data, and to draw very different conclusions about what the data meant.[16] This situation left them facing emotionally laden relationship conflict, and it motivated Adams and McAlister to work behind the scenes to garner support for their views. What the team lost was the opportunity to synthesize different perspectives and understand their implications for Elite's future.

Contrasting Hot and Cool Topics

When data are relatively accessible and straightforward, criteria and goals are largely shared, and differences don't run very deep, conflict is not difficult to resolve. In contrast, for hot topics, people may not agree which data are most relevant, and interpretation of the data can be highly subjective. Managers' subjective judgments are informed by their belief systems and are shaped by their past experiences, personal values, psychological needs, and political interests (see Table 1). As the conflict at Elite illustrates, when belief systems clash, conflicts resist resolution on the basis of facts and logic alone. McAlister differed

TABLE 2. Hot and Cool Systems

Hot System	Cool System
Emotional	Cognitive
"Go"	"Know"
Simple	Complex
Reflexive	Reflective
Fast	Slow
Develops Early	Develops Late
Accentuated by Stress	Attenuated by Stress
Stimulus Control	Self-Control

Source: J. Metcalfe and W. Mischel, "A Hot/Cool System of Delay of Gratification: Dynamics of Willpower," *Psychological Review*, 106/1 (1999): 3-19.

with Adams's conclusions, not because he disputed his facts, but because he held different beliefs about the power of products, he valued design more than Adams did, he didn't want to go "down market," and—having invested his entire career competing at the high end at Elite—his choice seemed to him obviously right. These were not matters of dispassionate fact that could be adjudicated to support shared goals. They were emotionally charged considerations that mattered to the individuals involved and to the business.

Hot topics spark emotional reactions that make reasoned deliberation difficult. Once sparked, such reactions should be addressed, as they rarely go away by themselves. Other psychological research sheds light on the underlying cognitive mechanisms. According to Janet Metcalfe and Walter Mischel, human beings process events through two distinct cognitive systems: a hot system and a cool system. While the former triggers us to respond to events emotionally and quickly ("to go"), the latter allows us to slow down and to think first ("to know"). The cool system is the basis for self-regulation and self-control. In contrast, the hot system is emotional and impulsive, triggered by stimuli that lead to instant reactions rather than reflection and reason.[17] When an event is processed through the hot system, it becomes difficult to think slowly and logically—difficult to avoid fast, reflexive conclusions about the task at hand or about those with opposing views. Table 2 contrasts properties of the hot and cool systems.

Three Practices that Facilitate Successful Conflict Resolution in Management Teams

How can management teams make wise and timely decisions when conflict heats up? They can learn a set of practices to engage both task and relationship conflicts productively. We call these practices: manage self, manage conversations, and manage relationships. By building the skills underlying each, management teams can use both task and relationship conflicts to gain a deeper understanding of business issues and of each other, despite emotional intensity at times.

Practice 1: Manage Self

Managing self refers to the ability to examine and transform the thoughts and feelings that hijack one's ability to reason calmly when conflicts heat up. Executives who wish to be adept at handling these situations can learn how to

manage the thoughts and feelings that surface when discussing hot topics. This does not mean counting to ten or suppressing their emotional reactions. Rather it means *reflecting on their reactions* and *reframing the situation,* thereby becoming less emotionally triggered and more able to ask questions and consider alternative interpretations.

Reflecting and reframing are the hallmarks of an individual's cooling system.[18] The more we engage in these two activities, the more connections we make between our hot and cool systems, building our capability to deploy the cooling system under stress. Practice at reflecting and reframing makes one's cooling system more complex and better able to interrupt emotional hijackings before they block progress.

Consider what happened in "Global Products," another manufacturing firm we studied, when two executives met to discuss the firm's marketing strategy. Brad Forsythe, the vice president (VP) of global product strategy, opened the debate. Citing reams of marketing data, he argued that the firm's core products ought to be positioned similarly around the world to build a global brand, explaining: "This is the *only* way we're ever going to eek more growth out of these products." The VP of the largest sales territory, Grady Davenport, disagreed. Drawing on his own market research and anecdotal data from his largest customers, he countered that each territory was unique and had to be approached that way. Forsythe, he maintained, didn't understand the situation in the territories, adding, "We're the ones at the battle front. We know precisely what's happening in the battlefield."

As their argument unfolded, each indicated in more or less subtle ways that he was completely convinced his own view was right. Tones of voice grew increasingly aggravated, and they let slip phrases like: "You can't honestly believe..." and "Anyone looking at this data would agree...." and "The data are obvious...." With each view now hermetically sealed, the conflict escalated until personal accusations erupted. Davenport accused Forsythe of trying to control the territories as part of a power grab, and Forsythe accused Davenport of trying to hoard the territories' diminishing power. Seeing little chance to win now that the conversation had turned personal and political, Davenport backed down, saying he would think about it. Later on, he pulled his fellow sales executives aside: "Forget it. We'll fight this one in the field." For his part, Forsythe knew that he had only won the battle, as he put it; even though Davenport had backed down in the meeting, the war was far from over. Leaving the meeting, Davenport was already planning his next moves, moves designed to neutralize whatever Forsythe might do to undermine his efforts.

Embedded in Forsythe and Davenport's spontaneous approach to this conflict are two tacit frames.[19] The first frame is: "I'm right, and it's self-evident that I'm right." Neither Forsythe nor Davenport said or did anything to suggest that they thought they could be missing something. Convinced of the self-evident rightness of their views, as evidenced in phrases such as "anyone would agree..." or "the *only* way...", they both acted in ways that made it hard to discover anything new or to see anything differently. As a result, each grew even

more convinced of the rightness of his views, making the conflict impossible to resolve and leading it to spill out into the halls, causing divisiveness that served neither the managers' nor the firm's interests.

The second tacit frame—also evident in Forsythe and Davenport's dispute—follows from the first: "Those who disagree with me are wrong (and wrong for being wrong)"—that is, they are incompetent, stupid, or driven by selfish motives.[20] Suggesting, even indirectly, that others are incompetent, ignorant, or immoral gives rise to defensive reactions that inhibit others' willingness to continue to express their views, making it all but impossible to resolve a conflict effectively.[21] However, people can avoid these consequences by reflecting on their reactions and reframing how they view the situation and each other.

Reflecting on Spontaneous Reactions

Once a conflict triggers an emotional reaction, reflecting can cool one's own emotions down by turning the automatic "*go*" response into a more deliberate "*know*" response. When we refer to reflecting, we are not referring to armchair reflection that's divorced from action. Instead we mean "reflecting-in-action," as Schön coined the term.[22] When they reflect-in-action, managers take notice of their own attributions and of the emotional reactions they spark, so as to view them in a more skeptical manner. They turn their own reactions into *objects of reflection*, shifting from the "go" system to the "know" system, which cools things down. In making this shift, managers neither ignore their feelings nor simply act on them; instead, they stop to examine them. From this reflective standpoint, feelings lose their tight grip on cognition.[23] As some have put it, this allows people to "have their feelings," without letting their feelings "have" them.

When reflecting on their reactions, managers are well served by asking the question: "How am I *interpreting* the situation such that I'm reacting this way?" The goal is to bring the manager's tacit framing of the situation to conscious awareness. Had Forsythe and Davenport taken this step, for example, each might have used his own frustration and defensiveness as triggers to realize that he was seeing the other person as trying to undermine him in a zero-sum game only one could win. Having surfaced this new framing, each would be in a better position to consider alternatives (e.g., "Perhaps [he] is not out to get me but only pursuing his interests, just as I am. Perhaps my efforts to gain power at his expense will lead both of us to lose power in the long run. Perhaps it's possible to invent a mutually beneficial solution.") Although there's no guarantee that these alternative interpretations will fit the facts better, they at least disrupt negative self-fulfilling prophecies.

Reframing

Effective approaches to managing oneself when a hot topic triggers an emotional response rely on two deliberate frames: by virtue of our different beliefs, we will each see things the other misses; and we are responsible for discussing our different views so that each of us can learn what we might be missing. Had Davenport and Forsythe reframed the situation, they might have

transformed how they saw both the product strategy and each other. For example, Davenport might have asked himself, "Why does Brad think we can position products similarly in such different markets? Does he think the issues I see aren't important for winning? And if so, why? Might there be a way to maintain a brand identity while speaking to local variations?" Similarly, Forsythe might have asked himself, "Why is Grady worried about the global branding strategy? What does he see in the territories that I might not see? Can I learn from asking him?" In this way, each would have reframed the situation from one in which the other was simply wrong to one in which he himself might be missing something important—motivating genuine inquiry. This would make it easier for them to work with their differences and to catch and correct flaws in their plans.

Reflecting and reframing can be extremely difficult when one's hot system is engaged; therefore, a skilled facilitator may at times be needed to help team members reflect on and reframe their reactions so they don't hijack their ability to reason. However, this is also where the rest of the team can play a key role. Those who are not directly embroiled in a debate (that is, not in the hot seat) have easier access to their cool systems, and hence can help others reflect and reframe when they are unable to do so.

In sum, when it comes to handling hot topics, self-management through reflecting and reframing is the foundational practice. No longer intent on maintaining the rightness of one's views or proving the idiocy of others', managers together can create possibilities none could produce alone. That, after all, is the point of teams: Doing together what you can't do alone.

Practice 2: Manage Conversations

The second practice channels managers' reframed reactions into better conversations, ones in which emotionally charged or divisive topics can be harnessed to make better decisions and to strengthen relationships. Over time such better-managed conversations build a team's collective cooling system, because teams see that by reflecting aloud on task and relationship issues, they can cool things down without stifling dissent or accumulating what Argyris has called "undiscussables."[24]

When we first encountered Elite's top management team, they had so many "undiscussables" that executives rarely said anything of importance for fear of setting off an emotional relationship conflict like the one between Adams and McAlister. Bemused by their dull meetings and long silences, the second author, who had just started working with them, asked the team, partly in jest: "How many undiscussables would this team discuss if this team could discuss undiscussables?"

Everyone laughed—until they realized she actually wanted an answer, at which point they fell silent. Breaking the silence after an awkward pause, one executive finally suggested a topic, then another did, and then another, until they had generated a list that included things like "how we'll grow," "where we'll compete," and "how we'll reduce costs." A team that avoids open discussion of these topics is unlikely to make progress on critical strategic and

tactical issues. Nothing about the topics themselves made them undiscussable. They were undiscussable, because the group knew that each one had the potential to trigger interpersonal conflict, as Adams and McAlister's interaction had done, leaving people feeling that they had to either take sides or remain silent.

At the same time, everyone recognized that their future success depended on their ability to deal with these topics directly and effectively. For this reason, they asked for simultaneous help from a strategy consultant and from Diana Smith in addressing the strategic issues underlying the firm's performance. Over the course of nine months, as the executives worked together to make a series of tough choices, the team learned how to keep their conflicts in a cooler zone. They did this by managing the team conversations in three specific ways:

- exploring their different beliefs (allowing them to see or consider new possibilities);
- acknowledging emotional reactions openly and exploring what led to them; and
- identifying the substantive conflicts as well as the relationship conflicts and discussing both as needed.

To illustrate each of these tactics and how they helped the team handle a relationship conflict, we return to a meeting that took place at Elite several months after the one described above.

Relationship Conflict Erupts

As part of the project, the top team at Elite Systems had collected market data and identified eight customer segments so as to choose which to serve (and which not to serve). Although team members now shared a common pool of facts on each segment, they still brought belief systems to the table that led them to view the same facts in fundamentally different ways. Not surprisingly, the very first market segment discussed by the team sparked a relationship conflict.

According to the market data, customers in this segment valued design options and performance above all else. Although slightly sensitive to price, people in this segment viewed price as far less important than either product variety or performance. The competitor who did best in this segment was a firm called "Icon," best known for its wide variety of product designs, each flashier and pricier than the next. McAlister led off the discussion by pointing to the segment's high scores on performance, arguing that these people were not simply interested in flashy design but in high-quality, high-performing products. He then suggested that they might be able to serve the segment's desire for design options in a much more cost-effective way by limiting the number of options and producing them more efficiently than they had historically.

As soon as McAlister finished talking, Adams jumped in—sounding exasperated—to accuse McAlister of "over-emphasizing the performance data and de-emphasizing the segment's interest in design," which he called the segment's "most distinguishing feature." He went on to say that the "data that spoke most to him" were the data on their competitor: "Look at how well Icon does in this

segment, and they're *entirely about image*!" Thinking that Adams was accusing him of wanting to be more like Icon, McAlister, sounding equally exasperated, denied what he took to be Adams's accusation: "I hear Frank cautioning us not to be like Icon, but that isn't what I'm saying!" Taking this as an outright denial of fact, Adams responded by saying, "I just don't get it! I don't see how we can succeed in this segment and *not* be like Icon. And if we're viewed as another Icon, we'll be *killed* in other segments: they'll assume we're too expensive and that we don't offer performance."

As these competing views reveal, Adams and McAlister brought to the same data very different beliefs. These filtered the data, making it difficult to reach agreement on their implications. McAlister focused on the data on product performance—evidence, to him, that the segment was more interested in prod-uct quality than in flashy design. Based on this interpretation, together with unstated beliefs about Elite's manufacturing processes, he concluded that the firm could satisfy the segment's need for design options less expensively than in the past. Looking at the same segment, Adams emphasized the high scores given to design options, and Icon's success with this segment. He interpreted these data as a clear desire for one-of-a-kind products that would be expensive to produce. Based on this interpretation, together with his beliefs the firm's design capability, he was convinced that pursuing this segment would be certain failure for Elite.

By the end of this brief exchange, Adams and McAlister were talking past each other, emphasizing different data, and making opposing points. Equally irritated with what they took to be the other's intransigence, they threw up their hands. In ten short minutes, they had resurrected the year-long relationship conflict that had derailed prior conversations about the core business.

Dig Into Divisive Topics

This time, however, the team was able to use the practices they had been learning to handle the conflict differently, cooling the situation by reflecting together on what happened. After a brief break in which he collected himself, McAlister's started:

> "I'm intrigued with the way this is coming out, because it's very different than I would've thought, and I find it really curious. I never would have dreamed that this discussion would spark so much emotion. I appreciate Frank's concerns, and I share them. While the cautions are important and need to be considered, we share a common fear. But we're talking past each other. I don't aspire for us to be like Icon, so I don't get what the problem is, and why it's sparking such a reaction."

Here, instead of ducking the emotional and relationship aspects of the conflict, McAlister addresses them directly. He takes the interpersonal risk of making his own reactions public, thus launching a reflective conversation about what hap-pened. Specifically, he tells the group that he finds it "really curious" that the conversation went the way it did, that he "never dreamed that this discussion would spark so much emotion." Second, instead of speculating privately about

why Adams reacted the way he did, he puzzles it through aloud—neither attributing nasty motives to Adams, nor discounting his concerns. Instead, he "appreciates" his concerns and recognizes that they have a "common fear." Third, instead of focusing on Adams's character or abilities, McAlister focuses on *the dynamics of the interaction*, by observing that they're "talking past each other." Fourth, he ends by returning to his initial puzzlement: "I don't get what the problem is, and why it's sparking such a reaction." This last reflection, which serves as a kind of inquiry, prompts Adams to respond in a similarly reflective mode, which he does by observing:

> "I think there are some underlying differences in the company over whether we focus too much or too little on design, and whether we have to cut design options or expand them. And this discussion is tearing at those."

Adams's response indicates that he too has cooled down, perhaps in response to McAlister's reflections. He speaks to McAlister's curiosity by offering his own observation, namely, that their discussion is touching on deep underlying differences at Elite. In posing this possibility, Adams is suggesting that the reason they're having difficulty is that they're faced with choices that go to the core of the firm's identity, as in, "Do we want to be a design company or a performance company?" Reaching agreement on this kind of question is never easy; after all, the team must deal with people's preferences not just data, and they must negotiate those preferences not just clarify interpretations of the data. Even so, in making this observation, Adams gives the team a fighting chance of addressing a long festering and previously undiscussable issue. By putting it squarely on the table for the first time, the team could (and did) come back to it again and again as they worked through the data's implications, and the team made choices about how and where to compete.

Examine Logic Behind Competing Views

Shortly after making his first observation about differences in the firm, Adams goes on to offer another observation, this one about McAlister.

> **ADAMS:** I also think Ian's nervous that we might cut design options down too much.
>
> **SMITH:** Let's ask.
>
> **MCALISTER:** I'm not worried about that. The problem is that we have the wrong options for these people, not that we don't have enough options. [*He goes on to explain.*]

Ideally, Adams would have simply asked McAlister if he was nervous, and if so, what was making him nervous, as Smith did, thus inserting the question that Adams leaves out. Nevertheless, he does make public here the kind of attribution most people keep private for fear of making matters worse. Instead of making matters worse, however, the action allows McAlister to rise to the occasion and respond non-defensively. That is to say, instead of denying his nervousness, as one might expect, he clarifies its source, noting that the problem isn't

that they don't have enough options; it's that they don't have the right kind. This clarification, offered in a reflective tone of voice, deepens Adams's understanding of McAlister's concerns. In this way, their reflections on the interaction serve to reduce rather than compound uncertainties.

Recognizing that the two were now in a more reflective state of mind, Smith uses this moment to reflect aloud on the dynamics between them.

> **SMITH:** As I listened, I thought each of you emphasized the data you thought the other was de-emphasizing. Ian emphasized the performance data, while Frank emphasized the design-options data. It's as if each of you was correcting for what you worried the other was missing, which only reinforced the other's worries.

> **MCALISTER:** I think that's true. I thought Frank was discounting the performance data, and that did make me nervous. I want to make sure he sees those data and doesn't over-emphasize or misinterpret the design options data. But I do see the strong design emphasis, and I recognize that people in this segment value that highly.

> **ADAMS:** And I see the performance data. I agree with that.

By reflecting on Frank and Ian's conflict—a tense relationship conflict—the team was able to identify and interrupt a core values-based tension in the company that made it difficult for the team to resolve substantive differences. Because these two executives embodied that tension, by acknowledging the relationship conflict, the group was able to recognize and discuss how certain competing values were undermining the firm's strategy development process. They also recognized a pattern, in which each manager emphasized the data he saw the other discounting, confirming the other's fears, and leading him to do the same. When groups are unaware of these kinds of dynamic patterns, they are more likely to get caught in them—and more likely to have members who blame each other for the impasse. By identifying the pattern, Adams and McAlister were able to cool the discussion down enough to return to the substance.

This short excerpt suggests three possibilities. First, it is possible to exercise and build a team's collective cooling system by reflecting on emotionally laden interactions—initially with help. Moments of collective reflection, like the one recounted here, build a team's competence in self-regulating. Second, for reflection to serve performance—that is, to promote good decisions—it must focus on the interactions that contribute to making certain conflicts too hot to handle. By discussing Frank and Ian's interaction, the team was in a better position to see and alter it and alter similar dynamics going forward. Finally, by engaging the conflict productively, both executives served the decision-making process—helping to deepen the team's understanding of each other and of the issues, and helping the team make progress.

Practice 3: Manage Relationships

The first two practices contribute to building team relationships that can withstand the temporary assault of disagreement. We have tried to help teams accelerate the relationship-building process by working in three areas: building

grounded trust (not blind trust); investing in particular relationships (those critical to the success of the firm by virtue of spanning key areas of interdependence); and developing members' ability to observe, map, and alter patterns of interactions that make relationship conflicts too hot to handle.

Build Grounded Trust

Managers who take the time to get to know each other as people and to understand each others' goals and concerns are less likely to speculate negatively about each other's motives and more likely to ask one another about their concerns. This is how to build trust that is grounded in experience. Ungrounded negative attributions fuel relationship conflicts that are unproductive. Investing time in getting to know one another helps prevent this.[25] Productive discussion of relationship conflicts requires explicit recognition (aloud) that people see things differently, that each view has strengths and weaknesses, and each manager has legitimate interests and concerns. Trust allows the team members to recognize that, even though no one is perfect, everyone is trying to do their best to work through the issues.

We acknowledge the chicken-and-egg conundrum. Trust helps work through issues, but building trust is better achieved by successfully working through difficult task issues. For this reason, help from an outsider may be needed—but not to do team building or trust building in a vacuum.[26] The best way to develop a self-reinforcing cycle of trust is to help teams deal constructively with real conflicts. With a small reserve of grounded trust, team members are better equipped to use moments when conflicts break out to strengthen their relationships.

This is what Dan Gavin, CEO of a large professional services firm we call "Gotham Associates," did with Luke Turner, head of a key business unit. Gavin had mentored Turner for years and viewed him as one of the firm's most valuable leaders. However, after promoting him recently to an important new line job, Gavin began to worry that Turner wasn't moving fast enough to succeed. In one especially anxious moment, he sent Turner what Turner later called a "flaming" voice-mail.

> "Look, we've got a problem and we have to discuss it soon. You're not making decisions fast enough. You're being too bureaucratic and making too many decisions by committee. It's not just *your* unit that's losing momentum; it's slowing down the whole company! I don't know whether you're risk-averse or just anxious, but it's a problem. Last year, you and I convinced the executive team that investing in your business unit was central to the firm's growth. They bought it, and now you're not delivering....I don't know what I'm going to say to them when we meet next week. The sooner we can connect on this the better. [Click]"

When Turner first heard Gavin's message, he was, as he put it, "mad as hell." "I'm all for moving fast," he recalled, "but let's get real about what's going on here." Before hitting the respond key, however, he caught himself, thinking, "Wait a second, what am I doing? That's not going to accomplish anything.

Besides he's right. It would be better if he weren't so negative about our progress, but I can see how from his point of view we're moving too slowly."

He then sent a measured response. "I'm with you," he began. "I agree we need to move quickly. Let's meet today or tomorrow to talk about it. I have some thoughts on how I might speed things up, and I'd also like to get yours." As soon as Gavin got Turner's response, he relaxed. In this state of mind, he realized that his voice-mail had been, in his words, "somewhat hysterical." That led him to reflect with Turner the next day on what had prompted him to send the voice-mail in the first place. Gavin told Turner that his reactions probably said as much about him and his anxieties as they did about Turner or his decision-making approach. He relayed how "his own sentimental and practical interests" in Turner's success had put him in a bind: on the one hand, he didn't want to undermine Turner by micromanaging him; on the other hand, he was genuinely worried about the pace of Turner's decision making. The bind led him to stifle a long standing concern about the decision-making pace, leading him to feel helpless and anxious. Hence, the emotional voice-mail.

In response to Gavin, Turner didn't deny that he was going too slowly. Instead, he agreed. He then went on to say that he preferred to know when Gavin was concerned, preferably before his concerns built up to a breaking point as they did this time. Turner's reflections had the immediate effect of relaxing Gavin's bind, freeing him up to raise concerns with Turner earlier. By the end of the meeting, they had not only come to understand what led to the flaming voice-mail, they understood each other better and figured out ways to pick up the pace of decision making together.

This discussion—and the positive outcomes it produced—would not have been possible had they not experienced and decided to discuss a relationship conflict. In this case, they used trust to build greater trust. This was not a blind trust that asked people to trust each other with no knowledge or track-record, even when their interests might be threatened. Asking managers to embrace this kind of trust is likely to lead to disappointment, especially if deviation from its unrealistic expectations is seen as a violation. The trust Gavin and Turner built, as part of working hard on both interpersonal and business issues, was grounded in awareness of their respective strengths and weaknesses, their concerns and interests. They recognize that they're fallible, that they will make mistakes, and that they will need to work together to solve and learn from these deviations along the way. This type of trust is resilient, as are relationships based on it.

Invest in Key Relationships

Not all relationships are equal. Some relationships exist along what we term "organizational faultlines"—interfaces in a firm where tensions build and eruptions occur, causing potential damage.[27] Organizational faultlines are places where agreement on strategy or action is as essential as it is difficult. For example, in some companies, research and development (R&D) and manufacturing must be in close communication to ensure the quality and cost of finished

products. In others, certain business units have the potential for counterproductive competition in the marketplace.

One well-documented example of a relationship that spanned an organizational faultline is the one between Steve Jobs and John Sculley at Apple Computer.[28] The two executives represented conflicting parts of the firm that needed to work together for Apple to succeed at a critical juncture in its history: brilliance in engineering design and savvy in marketing and management. Instead of coming together, however, the two executives got entangled in a conflict over the firm's future that turned personal and vitriolic. Each, completely convinced of the rightness of his view, lobbied to get rid of the other. In the end, the board did what most do: it took sides and fired Jobs, the more emotional character. In doing this, the board made it harder for the firm to learn how to reconcile serious institutional divides driven by conflicting values and beliefs—divides that undermined Apple's performance for years.

When firms take management relationships seriously, they consider more than skills and experience when considering people for senior roles. They consider the context of the team relationships in which the executives will operate. And, as especially important relationships take shape, management teams can periodically assess how they are working—viewing relationships, not individuals, as the unit of analysis. These assessments are deepened when an experienced advisor observes the team as it works together in meetings and asks people to recount incidents they consider representative. These data shed light on patterns of interaction, identifying the patterns that serve the relationship's effectiveness and those that don't.

"Mapping" interaction patterns is a useful tool for managing relationship conflicts. Many conflicts become unproductive because people don't understand the dynamic nature of interpersonal interaction—that is, how *what I say*, affects *what you think*, which affects *what you say* and then *what I think* next, and so on. Not seeing our own contribution to the other's behavior, we feel blameless when we encounter an interpersonal problem. We have taught numerous management teams to observe and map interactions, both to strengthen key relationships and to help people reframe their roles in a conflict. The discipline of mapping requires paying strict attention to *what* people are doing, not *why* they're doing it—that is, to the *behaviors* or actions of the people around the table, not their intentions or *motives*.

To illustrate, let's look at a dialogue that took place when a relationship conflict broke out in the top team of a struggling division at a pharmaceutical company we call "Clear Inc." over the future of the division's R&D unit. It started when Peter Naughton, the division's new CEO, confronted Tom Bedford, his VP of R&D, on his failure to focus the unit's research agenda:

> **NAUGHTON:** So we've settled the design issues, which is good. Now the question is: To what extent is R&D going to make the really difficult choices? Because one thing is clear: we can't just keep adding and adding costs to R&D.

BEDFORD: We'll start looking at that next month. But actually, I think we've got to revisit our strategy first. Our competitors see a very different future than the one corporate imagines for us. *That's* the big problem. They're spending fortunes and putting down bigger bets than we're able to...

NAUGHTON: [*Interrupting, his voice raised*] Hang on a second! If we're honest about this, our problem is that we were late waking up to what we might, could, and should do. There *is* an issue, but the issue is: we were *late*. Many of these questions should have been tackled *three years ago*. They weren't. It was simply, "Oh, let's toss another three million into the annual R&D budget." That's hardly a strategic answer.

BEDFORD: [*Looking down, shaking his head*] I'm not complaining. I'm—

NAUGHTON: [*Interrupting*]—We can't just chalk it up to corporate isn't supporting us.

BEDFORD: [*Looking up, raising his voice]:* But there's no criticism in my statement!

NAUGHTON: [*Emphatically*] You're saying, "It's not our fault in R&D. If only corporate would open their eyes, they would have seen all this." But if you look at how long it's taken us, you can't blame corporate—

BEDFORD: [*Interrupting*]—And if *you* look at the history of this business, we all know where blame can be placed, and it is on many heads [looking at Naughton].
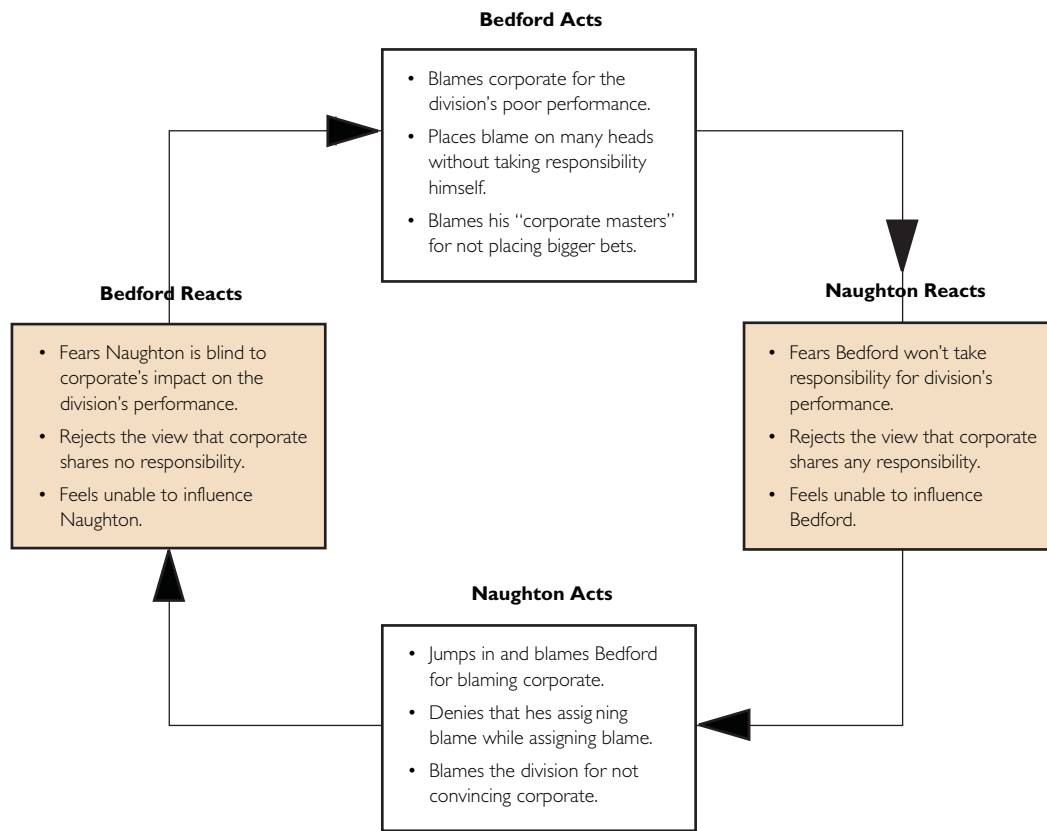
NAUGHTON: [*Sighing*] I wasn't trying to assign blame. I'm merely stating the reason the organization is behind is because *we've* been late.

BEDFORD: [*Without pause*]—And I'm merely saying that we've been late because we have yet to convince our corporate masters that the future is different than the one they see.

NAUGHTON: Then let it start here [*jabbing the table with his index finger*]. We haven't convinced *ourselves* yet. *We're* the ones who need to figure out what we'll invest in and what we'll cease to do. Until we do that, we can't possibly make a compelling case for support. [*Putting papers aside and turning to the meeting chair*] Next item?

Each executive left the meeting feeling frustrated and helpless—each convinced that the other person was the problem. As shown in Figure 1, from Bedford's perspective (shown in the gray "Bedford Reacts" box), Naughton was unfairly blaming the division for its weak performance, because corporate had not supplied his division the resources it needed to compete. This belief led him to complain to Naughton (in the "Bedford Acts" box). Naughton in turn saw these complaints as further evidence that Bedford was not up to the job (see the "Naughton Reacts" box), reinforcing his view that *Bedford* was the problem, and leading him to say as much (Naughton Acts). It is easy to see how this might reinforce, rather than ameliorate, Bedford's negative views. The one-directional arrows in the map illustrate the potential for a vicious cycle to take shape. However, by mapping the dynamic, with help, management dyads or teams can see how it works, why they are not making progress in resolving their conflicts, and how they might interrupt the vicious cycle.

FIGURE I. Mapping Interactions in A Blame Game

Bedford Acts

- Blames corporate for the division's poor performance.
- Places blame on many heads without taking responsibility himself.
- Blames his "corporate masters" for not placing bigger bets.

Bedford Reacts

- Fears Naughton is blind to corporate's impact on the division's performance.
- Rejects the view that corporate shares no responsibility.
- Feels unable to influence Naughton.

Naughton Reacts

- Fears Bedford won't take responsibility for division's performance.
- Rejects the view that corporate shares any responsibility.
- Feels unable to influence Bedford.

Naughton Acts

- Jumps in and blames Bedford for blaming corporate.
- Denies that hes assigning blame while assigning blame.
- Blames the division for not convincing corporate.

A week later, after being helped to map their interaction (Figure 1), Naughton and Bedford were able to see that their exclusive focus on the other's responsibility was a big part of the problem. Bedford saw that by ignoring his unit's role and focusing only on his "corporate masters," he was actually encouraging Naughton to emphasize what his unit could and should have done. Meanwhile, Naughton saw that by focusing exclusively on the division without acknowledging the constraints imposed by corporate, he reinforced Bedford's blaming of corporate. In sum, they saw that their finger pointing dynamic, far from solving Clear's performance problems, was only perpetuating them. With the division waiting for corporate to invest and corporate waiting for the division to focus, the two groups were caught in a waiting game that was costing the division precious time.

The map helped them see how they were together creating an impasse that frustrated everyone and inhibited progress. More important, they saw what each of them could do differently to break out of the impasse, leading both to feel less helpless and frustrated. For example, Naughton realized he would be

more effective if were he to ask Bedford, with genuine interest, what led him to keep pointing to corporate. By doing so, he discovered that Bedford wasn't blaming corporate entirely; he simply wanted to be reassured that the team would press corporate for greater investment. Bedford similarly saw that he could have asked Naughton how he thought making choices would help them keep up with their competitors. He then would have discovered that Naughton needed a more compelling focused R&D strategy with which to make a case for greater investment.

More generally, we have found that managers who learn to map relationship dynamics help each other avoid behaviors that cause conflicts to career out of control. This is because maps show the *systemic nature* of relationship conflict—how each party acts in ways that, first, exacerbate the others' negative attributions and, second, indirectly feed back to intensify rather than resolve the conflict. In this way, maps reveal the ways people contribute to creating or exacerbating the very problems they want to solve. This makes mapping a critical managerial competence for relationships that affect the speed and quality of core business decisions. Although initially difficult to master, this competence helps managers navigate all kinds of conflicts.

Conclusion: Building Team Resilience by Engaging Relationship Conflict Directly

Conventional wisdom, along with the weight of published management advice, has suggested that managers engage *task conflict* but avoid *relationship conflict* to have productive discussions. However, due to well-documented properties of human cognition, it is neither possible nor desirable to avoid discussing relationship issues when grappling with hot topics—those that involve competing values, uncertainty, and high stakes. Task conflicts can trigger negative attributions about others' motives, character, or abilities. When faced with the option to suppress or express these attributions, most managers will suppress. Yet, when these attributions—along with the relationship conflicts they trigger—are suppressed, they simply find their way into business conversations anyway, in the form of aggravated tones of voice that intensify the conflict and give rise to behind-the-scenes maneuverings designed to sabotage the "offending" parties. This dilemma and its negative impact on team performance are inevitable as long as relationship conflict is seen as "too hot to handle."

Given this dilemma, management teams should discuss relationship conflicts directly, *but only if they can do so in ways that allow for cooling them down as opposed to heating them up*. Management teams need to discuss hot topics in a cool manner: managing self, managing conversations, and managing relationships. Over time, teams that experiment with the actions and behaviors embedded in these three practices can built more robust cooling systems at the individual, team, and organizational levels (see Table 3).

Although rarely observed in spontaneous or natural behavior, these practices can be learned through practice and mutual commitment. At the same

TABLE 3. Summary of Practices for Discussing Hot Topics

Practices	Actions	Behaviors	Effects
Managing Self	Reflect	• Observe your emotional reactions. • Identify any interpretations of the situation or of others' intentions that you're making. • Explore what the interpretations may say about you (as well as about others).	• Cools down your emotional reactions. • Allows you to have your reactions without their having you. • Increases self-awareness.
	Reframe	• Invent (to try out) alternative attributions. • Consider what you might miss that others might see. • Extend to others the same rights you claim for yourself.	• Makes it possible to think outside the box of current beliefs. • Allows team members to formulate questions that generate new data. • Builds your individual cooling system.
Managing Conversations	Dig Into Divisive Topics	• Treat people's concerns and interests as legitimate topics of conversation. • Make your reactions public: State concerns, interests, beliefs, and data that shape your views and ask others to do the same. • Acknowledge any puzzles or "binds" that you experience, inviting others to help address them.	• Makes divisive topics discussable so they can be addressed directly. • Increases team members' awareness of themselves and others. • Deepens team members' understanding of one another and the topic at hand.
	Examine Competing Views	• Explore competing beliefs, relying on data everyone (not just you) considers valid. • Ask others what they are feeling and thinking and what leads them to feel/think that way. • Examine how different team members' interests relate to the interests of the team.	• Generates more useful data and a wider range of options. • Creates more powerful solutions. • Strengthens relationships among the team. • Builds the team's cooling system.

time, however, many teams find them challenging to put into practice for three reasons. First, in many organizations, acknowledging emotions—let alone digging into them—is just not done. Second, the kind of public reflection depicted here is by no means the norm in the executive suite. Third, the level of self-disclosure required is unlikely to exist without some initial foundation of psychological safety in a team, a level that rarely exists at the outset.[29] Past research has shown that teams with psychological safety are more able to discuss

TABLE 3. Summary of Practices for Discussing Hot Topics *(continued)*

Practices	Actions	Behaviors	Effects
Managing Relationships	Build Grounded Trust	• Build grounded trust—trust based on recognition of each person's assets and liabilities. • Maintain the right to make mistakes and extend that same right to others. • Assume responsibility for learning from mistakes and help others on the team do the same.	• Reduces the likelihood that people will feel betrayed or disappointed. • Improves the decision-making effectiveness of the team. • Accelerates learning for individual team members and for the team as a whole.
	Target Key Relationships	• Target for investment those relationships operating along organizational faultlines. • Map patterns of interaction that affect the team's ability to make decisions together. • Use conflicts to alter those dynamics that undermine the team's effectiveness.	• Makes it easier and quicker to resolve cross-functional problems. • Accelerates institutional/organizational learning. • Builds the firm's cooling system.

mistakes and differences.[30] Although such teams don't find it *easy* to do so, they learn to do it anyway, recognizing the longer-term benefits.

The teams we studied found several ways of addressing this challenge. First, as many more teams are doing today, they treated emotional intelligence as vital to effective leadership, at least as important as analytic intelligence,[31] and they invested time in learning how to handle their own and others' emotions effectively.[32] Second, they began their efforts by first reflecting on "warm conflicts"—that is, on conflicts that had not yet reached a high-level of divisiveness or emotionality. Third, they worked hard to create a sense of psychological safety by initially taking only small interpersonal risks, by ensuring that these small risks went unpunished, by encouraging others to follow suit, and by gradually increasing the level of risk.[33] Over time, these efforts created a virtuous cycle that built enough psychological safety to go against the grain of cultural norms governing emotionality, self-disclosure, and public reflection.

Other teams we have studied, like many management teams, tried to stamp out relationship conflict by redrawing organizational charts, redefining roles, or firing "problematic" managers. Although these efforts succeeded in separating people who did not get along, they did not build their firms' cooling systems, limiting their ability to make sound decisions quickly when faced with hot topics. Over time, this limitation slowed the growth of their people and their businesses in much the same way stamping out forest fires slowed the growth of Sequoia forests. Until recently, under the mistaken assumption that all fires were uniformly destructive, forest rangers made an all-out effort to put out all fires

whenever and wherever they occurred. The result? The forests stopped growing. Only in the last decade did they realize that these towering Sequoia trees actually needed fire to disperse the seeds in their pinecones. What's more, rangers didn't know that the trees had developed a built-in defense system that allowed them to withstand fires—that is, as long as they didn't get too hot. Unfortunately, by extinguishing every fire, the rangers unwittingly allowed the underbrush to flourish, fueling the fires that broke out and making them hotter than they otherwise would be. The net result was that the rangers' fire fighting efforts were actually harming, not preserving, the forest's growth.

Just as forest rangers have learned the vital role fire plays in the growth of Sequoia forests, so have some executives learned the vital role relationship conflict can play in accelerating the growth of their people and their businesses. Rather than eliminating it, the teams we've discussed in this article worked hard to learn practices that allowed their teams to withstand relationship conflicts by not letting them build up, by using private and public reflection to regulate their intensity when they did erupt, and by building their cooling systems at the individual, team, and organizational levels as a result. These teams, like the trees in the Sequoia forests, now encounter little that's too hot to handle.

Notes

1. For compelling arguments in favor of senior executive teams, see D. Ancona and D. Nadler, "Top Hats and Executive Tales: Designing the Senior Team," *Sloan Management Review*, 31/1 (Fall 1989): 19-29; D. Nadler, "Managing the Team at the Top," *strategy+business,* 2 (First Quarter 1996): 42-51. More recently, Edmondson, Roberto, and Watkins reviewed research on benefits and risks of top management teams (TMTs) and introduced a model in which TMTs need strong process management to achieve their potential. See A.C. Edmondson, M.A. Roberto, and M.D. Watkins, "A Dynamic Model of Top Management Team Effectiveness: Managing Unstructured Task Streams," *Leadership Quarterly*, 14/3 (June 2003): 297-325.

2. See A.C. Amason, "Distinguishing the Effects of Functional and Dysfunctional Conflict on Strategic Decision Making: Resolving a Paradox for Top Management Teams," *Academy of Management Journal*, 39/1 (February 1996): 123-148; B. Wooldridge and S.W Floyd, "The Strategy Process, Middle Management Involvement, and Organizational Performance," *Strategic Management Journal*, 11/3 (March/April 1990): 231-241; K.M. Eisenhardt, "Making Fast Strategic Decisions in High Velocity Environments," *Academy of Management Journal*, 32/3 (September 1989): 543-576; K.M. Eisenhardt, J.L. Kahwajy, L.J. Bourgeois, "How Management Teams Can Have a Good Fight," *Harvard Business Review*, 75/4 (July/August 1997): 77-85.

3. In the research literature, task conflict is conceptualized as intellectual or cognitive rather than emotional. Relationship conflict, in contrast, is emotional, including such terms as "interpersonal incompatibility" and "tension, annoyance, or animosity among group members." In particular, see K. Jehn, "A Multimethod Examination of the Benefits and Detriments of Intragroup Conflict," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 40/2 (June 1995): 256-282. De Dreu and Van Vianen defined *relationship conflicts* as involving interpersonal issues and personal taste. C.K.W. De Dreu and A.E.M. Van Vianen, "Managing Relationship Conflict and the Effectiveness of Organizational Teams," *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 22/3 (May 2001): 309-328. Amason similarly argued that relationship or affective conflict involves personal disputes and is dysfunctional. See Amason, op cit. Eisenhardt, Kahwajy, and Bourgeois argued that separating substantive and interpersonal issues, so as to rely on facts, helps teams work with conflict effectively. See Eisenhardt et al., op cit.

4. Most research relies upon survey measures to support this argument. In short, these studies show that task conflict is associated with better performance, and relationship conflict is

associated with poor performance, and so researchers have generally concluded that relationship conflict should be avoided (e.g., Jehn, Amason, and De Dreu and Van Vianen). This article does not dispute the correlational findings, and we concur that, on average, without skill or strategies for coping with relationship conflict, teams exhibiting frequent relationship conflict will have weaker performance. We argue simply that relationship conflict is more difficult to avoid than prior work has implied *and* that, with careful attention to process, relationship conflict can be managed in ways that help teams realize benefits from it. It is also important to note that later work, building on Jehn and Amason, found that task and relationship conflict tend to co-occur, which is consistent with our argument that they are difficult to separate in practice. Further, they find that task conflict quickly turns into relationship conflict when people do things such as raise their voices. Simons and Peterson argued that *trust* helps prevent task conflict from turning personal, an observation that is difficult to act upon but is consistent with our argument in this article. Our aim is to describe managerial practices that help teams establish that trust and, more important, learn about substantive views in productive ways, so as to keep disagreements from turning dysfunctional. See Amason, op. cit.; Jehn, op cit; T. Simon and R. Peterson, "Task Conflict and Relationship Conflict in Top Management Teams: The Pivotal Role of Intragroup Trust," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 85/1 (February 2000): 102-111; De Dreu and Van Vianen, op. cit. Most recently, Van der Vegt and Bunderson found that survey measures of task and relationship conflict had a correlation of almost .90 in their study of project teams and so they combined them into a single measure, "conflict." See G.S. Van der Vegt and S.R. Bunderson, "Learning and Performance in Multidisciplinary Teams: The Importance of Collective Team Identification," *Academy of Management Journal*, 48/3 (July 2005): 532-547.

5. Simons and Peterson argued that trust reduces the occurrence of relationship conflict following task conflict, and Jehn and Mannix found that open communication helped teams cope with task conflict but made relationship conflict worse. Finally, Thompson proposed that relationship conflict could be transformed into task conflict by emphasizing shared goals and learning about others interests. Consistent with the spirit of our findings, Thompson also advocated training groups to process conflict effectively by starting with low stakes issues—what we term "cool" topics. We go further than this prior work in being specific about the behavioral practices through which teams can productively identify shared goals, learn about others interests, and make decisions, while engaging relationship conflict directly. See Simons and Peterson, op. cit.; K. Jehn and E. Mannix, "The Dynamic Nature of Conflict: A Longitudinal Study of Intragroup Conflict and Group Performance," *Academy of Management Journal*, 44/2 (April 2001): 238-251; L. Thompson, *Making the Team: A Guide for Managers* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003).

6. For example, it is harder to say with any certainty what will or won't happen two to three years from now than it is to say what is happening now or what has happened in the past.

7. For research on management attributions in real situations, see C. Argyris, *Reasoning, Learning and Action: Individual and Organizational* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1982); C. Argyris, R.W. Putnam, and D.M. Smith, *Action Science* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1985). Through qualitative analysis of managerial conversation, Argyris and his colleagues explore the unspoken negative attributions that managers make about each other's intentions or abilities. For experimental research on the robustness of this phenomenon, see G. Marks and N. Miller, "Ten Years of Research on the False Consensus Effect: An Empirical and Theoretical Review," *Psychological Bulletin*, 102/1 (July 2987): 72-90. In laboratory research, social psychologists also have investigated the unflattering nature of causal attributions about other people's behavior. See, for example, R. Nisbett and L. Ross, *Human Inference: Strategies and Shortcomings of Social Judgment* (Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice Hall, 1980); D.T. Gilbert and P.S. Malone, "The Correspondence Bias," *Psychological Bulletin*, 117/1 (January 1995): 21-38; M. Ross and G.J.O. Fletcher, "Attribution and Social Perception," in G. Lindzey and E. Aronson, eds., *The Handbook of Social Psychology*, 3rd edition (New York, NY: Random House, 1985).

8. See L. Ross, "False Consensus Effect," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 13/3 (May 1977): 279-301.

9. L. Ross, ""The Intuitive Psychologist and His Shortcomings," in L. Berkowitz, ed., *Advances in Experimental Psychology*, Volume 10 (New York, NY: Academic Press, 1977), p. 405.

10. C. Argyris and D. Schön, *Organizational Learning: A Theory of Action Perspective* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1978).

11. Our ideas are not intended to extend to conflicts rooted in historically opposed ethnic groups or other identity group derived differences, which appears from the relevant literature to be the type of conflict most likely to spawn self-reinforcing, dysfunctional conflicts that defy remediation. Our framework and practices apply to work teams in which shared organizational goals do exist, even if at times they fail to dominate people's thoughts or actions.

12. See M.P. Follett, "Constructive Conflict," in P. Graham, ed., *Prophet of Management* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 1996).

13. Argyris, Putnam, and Smith, op. cit.

14. All company and individual names used in this article are pseudonyms.

15. Ross (1977b), op. cit.

16. Argyris, Putnam, and Smith (op. cit.) provide more detail on this interpersonal dynamic between managers, in which merely focusing on different data points quickly leads people to different conclusions, each without consciousness that their own conclusions are not necessarily "right."

17. See J. Metcalfe and W. Mischel, "A Hot/Cool System of Delay of Gratification: Dynamics of Willpower," *Psychological Review*, 106/1 (1999): 3-19.

18. Ibid.

19. Frames are taken for granted cognitions that go largely unnoticed, making it hard not to act on them. See A.C. Edmondson, "Framing for Learning: Lessons in Successful Technology Implementation," *California Management Review*, 45/2 (Winter 2003): 34-54. For foundational research that gave rise to this insight, see C. Argyris and D. Schön, *Theory in Practice: Increasing Professional Effectiveness* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1974).

20. See D. Smith, "Keeping a Strategic Dialogue Moving," <www.actiondesign.com/resources/theory/ksdm.htm>. Maxie Maultsby, a pioneer in the field of rational behavior therapy, emphasizes the need for reframing to improve individual psychological health and results. Larry Wilson has developed these ideas further in the realm of organizational change. D.M. Smith, "Different Portraits of Medical Practice," in R. Sawa, ed., *Family Health Care* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1992), pp. 105-130; D. Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1983); M.C. Maultsby, *Rational Behavior Therapy* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1984); L. Wilson and H. Wilson, *Play to Win: Choosing Growth over Fear in Work and Life* (Bard Press, Inc., 1998); P.S. Brønn and R.W. Berg, eds., *Corporate Communication: A Strategic Approach to Building Reputation* (Oslo: Gydendahl, 2002); C. Argyris and D. Schön (1974), op. cit.; R. Nisbett and L. Ross, op. cit.

21. C. Argyris (1982), op. cit.

22. See D. Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1983).

23. Metcalfe and Mischel, op. cit.; P. McArthur, R. Putnam, and D.M. Smith, "Climbing out of the Muck: How Self-Reflecting Teams Can Help You Break Free of Your Own Recurring Impasses," in P.M. Senge, A. Kleiner, C. Roberts, G. Roth, R. Ross, and B. Smith, eds., *The Dance of Change: The Challenges to Sustaining Momentum in Learning Organizations* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1999), pp. 120-127.

24. See C. Argyris, *Overcoming Organizational Defenses: Facilitating Organizational Learning* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990).

25. For quantitative research on top management teams that supported this statement, see Simons and Peterson, op. cit.

26. See, for example, A.C. Edmondson and A.W. Woolley, "Understanding Outcomes of Organizational Learning Interventions," in M. Easterby-Smith and M. Lyles, eds., *International Handbook of Organizational Learning and Knowledge Management* (London: Blackwell, 2003), pp. 185-211.

27. In geology, faults are cracks in the Earth's crust that result from differential motion within the crust, and faultlines are areas of intense pressure and heat, with the potential to erupt into earthquakes, volcanic activity, or tidal waves. In the management literature, Lau and Murnighan have introduced the term faultlines to describe a phenomenon in small groups in which two or more identity groups in a team show a high degree of overlap (e.g., gender and functional affiliation), increasing the chances of conflict. Our term instead captures those boundaries in organizations that, if not well connected to each other, have the potential to give rise to serious divisions in the firm and lost potential. See D.C Lau and J.K. Murnighan, "Interactions within Groups and Subgroups: The Effects of Demographic Faultlines," *Academy of Management Journal*, 48/4 (August 2005): 645-659.

28. See F. Rose, *West of Eden: The End of Innocence at Apple Computer* (New York, NY: Penguin, 1989); J. Sculley, *Odyssey: Pepsi to Apple: A Journey of Adventures, Ideas, and the Future* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1987).

29. See Edmondson, Roberto, and Watkins, op. cit.; A.C. Edmondson, "Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 44/2 (June 1999): 350-383.

30. See Edmondson (1999), op. cit.; A.C. Edmondson, "The Local and Variegated Nature of Learning in Organizations: A Group-Level Perspective," *Organization Science,* 13/2 (March/April 2002): 128-146.

31. See D. Goleman, *Emotional intelligence* (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1995).

32. See T. Casciaro and S.L Miquel, "Competent Jerks, Lovable Fools, and the Formation of Social Networks," *Harvard Business Review*, 83/6 (June 2005): 92-99.

33. Some prior research has suggested that higher status team members, such as those with formal authority, must take the initial risks for others to believe they are acceptable in a team. We agree that this is helpful, while encouraging all members to experiment with small risks. See A.C. Edmondson, R. Bohmer, and G.P. Pisano, "Speeding Up Team Learning," *Harvard Business Review,* 79/9 (October 2001): 125-134; A.C. Edmondson, "Speaking Up in the Operating Room: How Team Leaders Promote Learning in Interdisciplinary Action Teams," *Journal of Management Studies,* 40/6 (September 2003): 1419-1452.