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THE IMPORTANCE OF

MANAGING CONFLICT

IN AN AGILE TEAM

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The seminal theoretical model for managing conflict in teams

is the Tuckman Model, also known as Tuckman's Stages of Group Development. Developed by psychologist Bruce Tuckman in 1965, this model describes the four distinct stages that teams typically go through as they develop and mature:

Forming Stage
In this initial stage, team members come together, and there is a level of uncertainty, politeness, and orientating behavior as individuals seek to define the team's purpose, structure, and modes of operation.

Storming Stage
During this stage, conflicts and disagreements begin to emerge as team members vie for position, different ideas and approaches surface, and personality clashes may occur. This stage is characterized by a significant level of intragroup conflict.

Norming Stage
As the team moves through the storming stage, they begin to establish norms, rules, and processes for working together. Conflicts start to get resolved, and a sense of cohesion and unity emerges within the team.

Performing Stage
In this final stage, the team has developed a shared understanding, trust, and commitment to the team's goals. Roles are well-established, and the team functions effectively, with conflicts being managed constructively.

Tuckman's model highlights that conflict is a natural and inevitable part of team development, particularly during the storming stage. The key to managing conflict effectively is to recognize and address it constructively, facilitating open communication, establishing clear norms and processes, and fostering trust and cohesion within the team.

Following the Tuchman model, here are some practical conflict management exercises that a team leader could facilitate to build conflict resilience in her team:

Forming Stage

Icebreaker Exercise: Have team members introduce themselves and share something unique about themselves. This helps build initial rapport and understanding.

Team Charter Exercise: Facilitate a discussion to define the team's purpose, goals, roles, and expectations. This sets the foundation for collaboration and can prevent future conflicts.

Storming Stage

Role-Play Conflict Scenarios: Prepare fictional scenarios that depict common team conflicts (e.g., differing work styles, communication breakdowns, priority clashes). Have team members role-play these scenarios and discuss constructive ways to address the conflicts.

Conflict Style Assessment: Have team members take a conflict style assessment (e.g., Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument) to identify their preferred conflict-handling styles (competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, accommodating). Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of each style.

Norming Stage

Establish Ground Rules Exercise: Facilitate a discussion to establish ground rules for how the team will handle conflicts and disagreements. These rules should promote open communication, respect, and constructive problem-solving.

Conflict Resolution Process Exercise: Have the team develop a step-by-step process for resolving conflicts within the team. This could include procedures for identifying issues, gathering perspectives, brainstorming solutions, and reaching consensus.

Performing Stage

Retrospective Exercise: After completing a project or milestone, facilitate a retrospective session where team members reflect on how they handled conflicts during the project. Discuss what worked well, what could be improved, and capture lessons learned for future projects.

Conflict Coaching: Provide ongoing coaching and guidance to team members on managing conflicts as they arise. Observe team interactions, provide feedback, and suggest conflict resolution strategies tailored to specific situations.

Continuous Improvement

Conflict Management Skill-Building: Provide training on specific conflict management skills such as active listening, assertive communication, emotional intelligence, and negotiation tactics.

Team-Building Activities: Incorporate team-building activities that promote trust, communication, and collaboration. These activities can help strengthen the team's ability to manage conflicts constructively.

Remember, these exercises should be adapted to fit the specific needs and dynamics of your team. Additionally, it's essential to create a safe and supportive environment where team members feel comfortable discussing and practicing conflict management strategies.