

Workplace Conflict Resolution and Team Performance

Posted on October 9, 2024

Introduction

The conflict among Riley, Hyeon-Ju, and Malik appears to have developed around disagreements about audit results, the way concerns were expressed, and the effect of public criticism on trust. The original response correctly recommends private conversation, active listening, respectful feedback, and a supportive climate. It can be strengthened by separating the people from the audit problem, clarifying the evidence, preserving accountability, and establishing a repeatable process for future disagreements. Conflict is not automatically harmful. Task conflict can improve decisions when people challenge evidence respectfully, while relationship conflict tends to consume attention and damage cooperation. A manager should therefore avoid forcing premature harmony or deciding that one person is “too sensitive.” The objective is to identify what happened, correct any inaccurate work, repair the interaction, and redesign the team’s review process so that disagreement improves quality rather than becoming personal competition. (Jehn, 1995; Tjosvold, 2008)

The main [conflict management styles](#) and their effects on group decisions are examined separately.

Question One: How Should the Conflict Between Riley and Hyeon-Ju Be Handled?

The first step is immediate containment. The manager should stop public argument, make clear that the audit will be reviewed through evidence, and prevent further accusatory messages. This is not a final judgment about who is correct. It protects the team from escalating while facts are gathered. Riley and Hyeon-Ju should then meet separately with the manager. Each person should describe the sequence of events, the audit concern, the language used, the desired outcome, and any prior interaction affecting the current dispute. Separate conversations reduce performance for an audience and allow the manager to identify safety, discrimination, retaliation, or serious misconduct that might require a formal process instead of ordinary mediation. (Stone, Patton, & Heen, 2010)

Clarify the Audit Issue Before the Relationship

Issue

The team must establish what the disputed results actually show. The manager should identify the audit standard, sample, data source, calculation, reviewer, and decision rule. An error should be corrected regardless of who raised it or how uncomfortable the conversation became. Separating technical accuracy from interpersonal conduct prevents two common mistakes: rejecting valid criticism because it was delivered poorly, or excusing disrespect because the speaker happened to be correct. If the evidence is ambiguous, an independent reviewer or agreed recheck can resolve it. The manager should document the conclusion and explain the reasoning to those involved. (Stone, Patton, & Heen, 2010)

Address Riley's Conduct

If Riley raised concerns publicly in a way that embarrassed or blamed Hyeon-Ju, the manager should describe the specific behavior and its effect. Feedback should avoid character labels such as "aggressive" or "unprofessional" without examples. A useful statement is: "In the meeting, you said the audit was careless before confirming the calculation, and the discussion shifted from the evidence to Hyeon-Ju's competence." Riley should be encouraged to raise quality concerns promptly but through language focused on the work: "I am seeing a discrepancy in these records; can we review the method?" Accountability is not a request for silence. It is a requirement that criticism be accurate, proportionate, and directed toward a shared standard. (Stone, Patton, & Heen, 2010)

Address Hyeon-Ju's Experience and Responsibility

Hyeon-Ju should have an opportunity to describe the impact of the interaction and any concern about fairness or status. The manager should not demand that Hyeon-Ju simply become more receptive to criticism. Psychological safety requires that people can receive challenge without humiliation. At the same time, if the audit contains an error, Hyeon-Ju should participate in correcting it, identifying the cause, and preventing recurrence. The manager can distinguish "your work requires revision" from "you are not capable." This allows learning without minimizing the harm of public personal criticism. (Edmondson, 2019)

Clarify Malik's Role

Malik's position is not fully described, but the original response suggests that Malik also has concerns about audit results. The manager should determine whether Malik witnessed the exchange, contributed to the disagreement, withheld relevant evidence, or holds a coordinating role. Bystanders influence team climate. If Malik remained silent while the argument became harmful, coaching can focus on constructive intervention: ask the group to return to the standard, request a pause, or

suggest independent review. If Malik joined one side before checking the evidence, the lesson concerns coalition building and confirmation bias. The objective is not to make Malik a judge of colleagues, but to define responsible participation. (Tjosvold, 2008)

Conduct a Joint Problem-Solving Meeting

A joint meeting should occur after facts and risks have been assessed. The manager can set ground rules: one person speaks at a time, claims are tied to evidence, interruptions are limited, intent and effect are discussed separately, and the group identifies future behavior. Each person can summarize the other's concern before responding. The conversation should produce concrete agreements, such as using a defined review template, raising discrepancies privately before a team meeting when feasible, documenting sources, and escalating unresolved technical questions to a third reviewer. A vague promise to "communicate better" is unlikely to change behavior. (Stone, Patton, & Heen, 2010)

Use Interests Rather Than Positions

Riley's position may be that Hyeon-Ju's audit is wrong, while Hyeon-Ju's position may be that Riley is disrespectful. Beneath those positions may be interests that can coexist: audit accuracy, professional reputation, fair workload, timely completion, and confidence in the team. Interest-based conflict resolution asks what each person needs in order to work effectively. Riley may need a credible method for challenging results; Hyeon-Ju may need concerns raised without public humiliation; Malik may need clarity about review authority. Agreements built around interests are more durable than deciding who "won" the argument. (Stone, Patton, & Heen, 2010)

When Mediation Is Not Appropriate

Ordinary mediation assumes that participants can negotiate safely and that the issue is not serious misconduct requiring investigation. It may be inappropriate if there are threats, harassment, discrimination, retaliation, fraud, intentional data alteration, or a significant power imbalance. In those cases, the manager should follow organizational policy, involve human resources, compliance, or another authorized function, and protect evidence. Requiring a harmed employee to sit in a reconciliation meeting can transfer responsibility onto the target. The process must fit the seriousness of the facts.

Question Two: How Could Unresolved Conflict

Affect Team Performance?

Unresolved relationship conflict can reduce information sharing because employees avoid one another or withhold early concerns. Audit work then becomes less reliable: errors may remain hidden, duplicate checking increases, and members may defend their own results instead of examining evidence. Time is diverted from the primary task into private conversations, message interpretation, and alliance formation. Employees may attend meetings physically while contributing little. These effects can occur even when the original disagreement is small. The longer the conflict persists, the more likely team members are to interpret neutral actions through distrust. (Jehn, 1995; Tjosvold, 2008)

Reduced Psychological Safety

Psychological safety means that team members believe they can ask questions, report mistakes, and disagree without humiliation or retaliation. If Riley's public criticism goes unaddressed, others may avoid reporting uncertainty. If valid audit concerns are dismissed to protect feelings, others may believe accuracy is less important than harmony. Both outcomes are dangerous. The manager must demonstrate that respectful challenge is expected and personal attack is not. A psychologically safe team is not conflict-free; it is able to discuss conflict without threatening belonging. (Edmondson, 2019)

Lower Audit Quality

Audit and quality-assurance work depends on consistent definitions, traceable evidence, and independent review. Personal conflict can produce selective checking, exaggerated fault finding, defensive documentation, or reluctance to review a colleague's work. Confirmation bias may lead members to search mainly for evidence that supports their side. If leaders judge accuracy through popularity rather than method, the credibility of the entire function declines. Customers, regulators, or senior leaders may receive unreliable conclusions. The team should therefore treat conflict management as part of quality control, not as a separate interpersonal activity. (Jehn, 1995)

Delays and Rework

When employees do not trust one another's results, work may be repeated unnecessarily. Approvals are delayed because every figure is challenged, while urgent deadlines encourage people to bypass review entirely. Meetings become longer and less decisive. These costs are often invisible because they appear as ordinary communication rather than a separate budget item. Managers can monitor cycle time, reopened findings, corrections, and escalation frequency to identify whether conflict is affecting workflow. Data should be interpreted cautiously because more reporting can initially reflect

improved transparency. (Tjosvold, 2008)

Morale, Absence, and Turnover

Persistent conflict can produce anxiety, anger, sleep disruption, disengagement, and intention to leave. Team members not directly involved may become exhausted by pressure to choose sides. High performers may transfer rather than remain in a hostile environment, leaving the organization with less experience and greater recruitment costs. Absence and turnover should not be used as proof that one person caused the problem; they are signals requiring broader assessment of leadership and culture. Early resolution is less costly than rebuilding a team after trust has collapsed. (Jehn, 1995)

Client and Stakeholder Impact

If the team's audits inform financial, safety, compliance, or operational decisions, internal conflict can affect people outside the group. Inaccurate findings may create unnecessary corrective action or fail to detect real risk. Stakeholders may receive contradictory messages from different team members. Confidential disagreements may be discussed inappropriately with clients, damaging reputation. The manager should establish one authorized communication path for disputed results while internal review occurs. Transparency is important, but it should be accurate and coordinated.

Question Three: How Should Riley, Malik, and Hyeon-Ju Be Coached for Future Audit Concerns?

Coaching should begin with a shared audit-challenge protocol rather than three unrelated lectures. The protocol can require a person who identifies a discrepancy to record the standard, evidence, expected result, observed result, and possible impact. The reviewer then invites the original analyst to explain the method. If the difference remains, a designated third party decides or facilitates resolution. This process slows impulsive accusation without silencing urgent concerns. It also creates records from which the team can identify recurring ambiguity in standards or training. (Tjosvold, 2008)

Coaching Riley

Riley should practice separating observation, interpretation, and judgment. "The sample contains three records not included in the total" is an observation. "The calculation may need revision" is an interpretation. "You do careless work" is a personal judgment. Riley can be coached to use questions, verify privately when practical, and escalate based on risk rather than irritation. If the issue threatens safety, legality, or immediate loss, prompt escalation is appropriate. Coaching should affirm Riley's

responsibility to protect quality while making clear that credibility depends on respectful and accurate communication. (Stone, Patton, & Heen, 2010)

Coaching Hyeon-Ju

Hyeon-Ju can be coached to receive technical feedback through a defined process, ask for evidence, and distinguish criticism of one result from judgment of professional worth. Defensive reaction is understandable after public embarrassment, but future review still requires engagement. Techniques include summarizing the concern, checking the standard, and agreeing on a verification step before debating motives. Hyeon-Ju should also be encouraged to report disrespect or bias rather than tolerate it. Coaching is not an instruction to absorb harmful behavior silently. (Stone, Patton, & Heen, 2010)

Coaching Malik

Malik can be trained as a constructive peer or facilitator if that fits the role. The skills include noticing escalation, redirecting discussion to the audit criteria, inviting quieter voices, and refusing gossip or coalition pressure. Malik should not mediate beyond competence or conceal a serious problem in the name of team unity. A useful intervention is: “We seem to be debating competence rather than the data. Can we identify the standard and review the sample?” This helps the team without deciding the outcome prematurely. (Tjosvold, 2008)

Active Listening

Active listening involves attention, clarification, paraphrase, and confirmation. It is not passive agreement. In a technical disagreement, a listener might say, “I understand that you used the updated sampling rule and believe the earlier template is outdated; is that correct?” This reduces argument about a position the speaker did not hold. Listening should also include emotion when relevant: “You felt the public comment damaged your credibility.” Naming impact can make it easier to return to evidence. The manager should model this behavior rather than merely instruct employees to use it. (Stone, Patton, & Heen, 2010)

Use of “I” Statements

“I” statements are useful when they communicate experience and need without disguising accusation. “I become concerned when results differ and I cannot see the source data; I need a traceable calculation” is constructive. “I feel that you are incompetent” remains a judgment despite its grammar. Coaching should focus on observable behavior, effect, and request. The formula is a tool, not a guarantee of respectful communication. (Stone, Patton, & Heen, 2010)

Supportive and Defensive Communication Climates

Jack Gibb distinguished supportive communication from climates characterized by evaluation, control, strategy, neutrality, superiority, and certainty. Supportive interaction uses description, problem orientation, spontaneity, empathy, equality, and provisionalism. In this case, “Let us compare the two calculations” is problem-oriented, while “You always get these audits wrong” is evaluative and absolute. Provisional language such as “I may be missing a change in the standard” makes room for correction. A supportive climate does not avoid accountability. It makes accountability more accurate because employees can discuss errors without protecting themselves through denial. (Gibb, 1961)

Feedback Standards

The team should use a feedback model such as situation-behavior-impact-next step. For example: “In today’s review meeting, the audit was called careless before the sample was checked. The discussion became defensive and the verification stopped. Next time, state the discrepancy and request review before judging the analyst.” Feedback should be timely, private when possible, and proportionate. Positive feedback should identify effective behavior as specifically as corrective feedback. General praise does not teach the team which practices to repeat. (Stone, Patton, & Heen, 2010)

Escalation Rules

Not every discrepancy needs a manager. The team can define thresholds based on financial value, safety, legal exposure, deadline, recurrence, and disagreement after peer review. Minor calculation questions may be resolved by the analysts. High-risk findings should be escalated immediately with evidence. Clear rules reduce accusations that someone is overreacting or concealing problems. They also protect employees from pressure to keep serious issues informal.

Team Learning After Resolution

Once the immediate conflict is resolved, the manager should conduct a short learning review. The questions are: What allowed the discrepancy? Which part of the process was unclear? What helped resolve it? What will change? The review should avoid repeating private details unnecessarily. Possible improvements include version control, calibration sessions, sample templates, paired review, or clearer ownership. Conflict becomes useful when it reveals a weakness in the system rather than ending only with an apology. (Tjosvold, 2008)

Follow-Up and Accountability

The manager should schedule follow-up rather than assume one meeting repaired the relationship. Short reviews can assess whether agreements are followed, whether audit accuracy improved, and whether retaliation or avoidance occurred. Performance expectations should be documented consistently. If disrespect or inaccurate work continues, progressive management may be required. Follow-up also gives the manager an opportunity to recognize improvement. People are more likely to change when the system notices successful behavior, not only failure.

Conclusion

The conflict between Riley and Hyeon-Ju should be managed through containment, individual fact gathering, independent review of the audit, specific feedback, and a structured joint meeting. Malik's role should be clarified so that peer involvement supports evidence rather than alliance formation. If unresolved, the conflict can reduce psychological safety, audit quality, cooperation, speed, morale, and stakeholder trust. Coaching should teach each employee how to separate observation from judgment, verify concerns, listen actively, give behavior-specific feedback, and escalate according to risk. A supportive communication climate is not one in which people avoid disagreement. It is one in which disagreement remains focused on shared standards and does not threaten dignity. The long-term solution is therefore both relational and procedural: repair the interaction and create an audit-review system that makes respectful challenge the normal route to better performance. (Edmondson, 2019; Jehn, 1995; Gibb, 1961)

References

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