Critical Thinking Module 4: Conflict Management and Negotiation Strategies

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CSC501: Management for the Computer Science Professional

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December 7, 2025

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The main goal of project management is to deliver a valuable product, service, or result by meeting the needs of stakeholders and managing their expectations. Achieving this goal requires the Project Manager (PM) to balance resources and adapt to changing project constraints and requirements (e.g., Time, Cost, Scope), while managing stakeholders' demands and expectations. Inevitably, different degrees of conflict arise from these competitive factors. Therefore, properly managing these conflicts and their resolutions is essential for the success of the project. This essay explores a dialogue scenario on inter-departmental conflict involving common project conflict "Gold Plating," possible helpful negotiation methods, and expert insights on how to identify the best approach for resolving the conflict.

The Scenario: The Gold Plating Conflict

In the context of project management, Gold Plating happens when project development team members themselves initiate a change or additional work to a project without any request from stakeholders (Ucertify, n.d.a). The following dialogue scenario illustrates a disagreement between Sarah, the PM, and Alex, the lead developer, over a Gold Plating issue. Sarah and Alex are in a video conference call, discussing the demonstration of a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) software to a customer. The CRM project is at the end of its execution phase and has a tight remaining budget:

> *- Sarah: "Hello Alex, first, I want to thank you for all the hard work you put in this project, and I appreciate how valuable your expertise and leadership were to bring us to this point."*
>
> *- Alex: "Hello, Sarah, and thank you!"*
>
> *- Sarah: Before discussing the demonstration, I have a couple of questions about a CRM module. I reviewed the latest CRM features pushed into the development branch this morning. I noticed a new module called 'Mobile_Responsive_Layout' containing a login screen feature for*

smartphones. I am not sure why this module was implemented, as it is not listed in the Scope Statement of the project. Additionally, the Scope Statement lists that the CRM requires only a Desktop-Only Web Portal. Can you explain to me how the module aligns with the project scope, or why it was implemented?"

- Alex: "Yeah... I decided to go the extra mile! I realized, while working on the CSS for the desktop Web Portal, that it wouldn't be much work to make the portal more responsive to accommodate mobile devices. I figured that although it is not part of the project scope yet, it will be soon, as everyone uses cell phones in 2025. I was being proactive, saving development time."

- Sarah: "I understand your point; it seems harmless. However, this is a case of 'Gold Plating,' as you know very well, no matter how harmless the addition of the features seems to be. This can become a serious issue for the budget."

- Alex: "How so?"

- Sarah: "Well, the Stakeholder Requirements Document indicated that a Mobile-Web-Portal was not a need as it did not provide real value to the CRM, so we did not budget for the Quality Assurance (QA) cycles needed to test the Web-Portal on different mobile devices and mobile OSs. Additionally, we did not plan funds for security audits of mobile endpoints."

- Alex: "Even though implementing a Mobile-Web-Based portal within this project may seem to have low value right now, I am pretty sure that at some point in the future, the customer will demand it, budgeted or not."

- Sarah: "You're probably right; however, we will not know until the customer actually asks for it. If they do, we will process a formal Change Request, and this is when the customer will be informed that developing and implementing such a feature comes at a high cost and is not covered by the current budget. Thus, it will need to be treated as a new project with its own budget. What I am trying to say is that adding the Mobile_Responsive_Layout module now may let the customer believe that the cost of developing and implementing the feature, including all the testing and security measures associated with it, is covered by the current budget. When it is not… In other words, we cannot absorb the high cost of developing it."

- Alex: "Ok, I see your point, I get it! So? Are you asking me to remove the module from the CRM development branch? It will be such a waste of my team's time and future time, as it will probably be requested by the customer at some point."

- Sarah: "I appreciate that you see my point. How about we find some common ground? Let's keep it on the development branch for now and pause its development. We do not have to delete it…Instead, let's not release it to the

production branch, so we don't have to demonstrate it to the customer. What
do you think?"

- Alex: "I feel better about it, knowing that my work isn't wasted."

- Sarah: "Super! Now let's talk about the demonstration itself."

Methods of Negotiation and Finding Common Ground

In the scenario, if Sarah were less collaborative and more directive, simply ordering the removal of the unauthorized module could have resulted in the coworker feeling undervalued and resentful, potentially reducing his capacity to efficiently perform future tasks, or could have resulted in Alex resisting removing the module, effectively stalling the project until a solution incorporating the module is accepted, or being forced to remove it by upper management. Instead, she used management negotiation techniques such as the Confronting/Problem Solving technique and the Servant Leader approach to resolve the confrontation successfully.

The Confronting/Problem-Solving technique encourages, when relationships between parties are important, to approach a conflict as an issue to be solved rather than a battle to be won (Ucertify, n.d.b). Sarah applied this method by trying to find a solution to the Gold Plating dilemma by not approaching it from a confrontational and opinionated standpoint, that is, her opinion versus Alex's opinion. Instead of diminishing Alex's perspective, she listened to Alex's perspective (e.g., the work is valuable and saves future time) and approached it as valid input that needed to be acknowledged. By proposing to "keep it (module) on the development branch" but "pause its development," she creates a win-win solution where the work is preserved for a possible future use, and the current scope remains uncompromised.

Furthermore, the Confronting/Problem-Solving technique is based on the Ken Thomas and Ralph Kilmann Conflict Management model. The model categorizes conflict behavior into two dimensions: Assertiveness, which involves satisfying one's own concerns, and

Cooperativeness, which involves satisfying others' concerns (Channell, 2025). Additionally, Sayadat (2025) argues that there is no single "best" style of conflict management; a leader must be able to shift between styles depending on the situation. Based on the Ralph Kilmann Conflict Management model, he identifies five conflict management styles depending on the situation. Based on the Ralph Kilmann Conflict Management model, he identifies five styles: Competing (high Assertiveness, low Cooperativeness), Collaborating (high Assertiveness, high Cooperativeness), Compromising (moderate Assertiveness, moderate Cooperativeness), Avoiding (low Assertiveness, low Cooperativeness), and Accommodating (low Assertiveness, high Cooperativeness). In a scenario involving Gold Plating or Scope Creep, Bhoyar and Sandhir (2025) explain that the line that saves a project from failure lies in the capacity of a PM to say no to Scope Creep and knowing that you do have to say yes to Gold Plating. Sarah effectively walked this line by stopping the deployment and holding further development of the unapproved module (not saying yes to Gold Plating) using a Compromising conflict management style and by defining the module development as an explicit request that the customer needs to make (saying no to Scope Creep), requiring the unapproved feature to have its own project and budget using a Competing conflict management style. Personally, I would approach the issue in the same manner as it allows the project to go forward and be successful, by protecting from Gold Plating and Scope Creep while maintaining the team members' sense of worth and ownership over the project.

The Confronting/Problem-Solving technique, using different conflict management styles depending on the situation, and knowing when to say 'no' are often not enough to fully resolve a conflict. An essential quality that every PM should demonstrate is the capacity for Emotional Intelligence (EI). EI is "the ability to identify, assess, and manage the personal emotions of

oneself and other people" (Ucertify, n.d.b, p.86). In the scenario, Sarah showed a high level of EI as she regulated her own reactions very well. She did not show signs of anger about work that she did not authorize and was not informed about, effectively bypassing her leadership. Additionally, she manages Alex's defensiveness very well by employing a Servant Leadership approach, by acknowledging Alex's perspective and focusing on finding a resolution. By doing so, she proposes a win-win solution to the conflict, ensuring that the project moves forward without being stuck in an unproductive stalemate. Additionally, it preserves trust between Sarah and Alex, which is crucial for team cohesion. This EI approach to project management is supported by Mersino (2013) in his book "Emotional Intelligence for Project Managers." He asserts that EI is a major factor influencing the capacity of modern project managers to deliver a project successfully, as it enables them to transition from a legacy command-and-control approach to a more efficient Servant Leadership approach. Mersino argues that by validating team members' emotions and motivations, PMs can resolve high-stress conflicts without compromising or damaging the trust of their team members, which is crucial for the success of future project phases and tasks. Personally, as Sarah did, I would approach a similar conflict using EI with the Servant Leadership approach, as it allows the project to go forward, as well as resolving conflicts and preserving team member trust in my leadership as a PM. However, to add to Sarah's resolution approach, if I may, she should have considered reinforcing her leadership role as a PM by asking Alex that, although she appreciates his willingness to be proactive and efficient, he must remember to go through appropriate channels before adding unplanned features to a project.

Conclusion

To deliver a valuable product, service, or result by meeting the needs of stakeholders and managing their expectations, PMs need to overcome challenges in a project from resources, budget, goals, stakeholder support, and the people involved in the team. The "Gold Plating" scenario between Sarah and Alex illustrates well how a skillful approach to a program management project can address these challenges by resolving conflicts by using various management strategies. In the scenario, Alex's intention to add a mobile module was motivated by a desire for efficiency, and Sarah correctly identified a potential Gold Plating issue, introducing risks, such as unbudgeted QA and security costs that could compromise the project's budget and consequently the project's success. These conflicting perspectives created a conflict between Sarah and Alex, potentially jeopardizing the project's stability, team cohesion, and overall project success by not allowing the project to move forward. As a competent PM, Sarah employed management strategies that involved the Confronting/Problem Solving technique and demonstrated IE in tandem with the Servant Leadership approach. These strategies allow her to validate Alex's contribution, keeping him productive, without compromising the project's scope or budget. Ultimately, the success of most projects lies in a PM's ability to manage conflict by demonstrating EI, adopting a Servant leadership approach, and utilizing management strategies that validate team members, listening to the evolving needs of the stakeholder, while safeguarding the project scope and budget.

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