By: Galina Knopman
March 10, 2006
(Rev. September 11, 2020)

Managing Stressed Out Teams Without Stress

Abstract

This paper was developed from and for teams doing organizational assessments called Standard CMMI Appraisal Method for Process Improvement or SCAMPI, audits, or other intense team or group work. The Standard **CMMI** Appraisal Method for Process Improvement (**SCAMPI**) **is** the official Software Engineering Institute (SEI) method to provide benchmark-quality ratings relative to Capability Maturity Model Integration (**CMMI**) models. I have kept the term SCAMPI in the paper. You can replace SCAMPI with Audit or any other team task.

The concepts herein can be adapted to any intense team event. I have left the assessment terminology in to keep the concepts intact and relatable.

Is good planning enough to reduce team stress? Time can be saved, and stress levels reduced by any team leader and any team member (or anyone else) using a suite of Team Management Techniques to address situations before they grow into a conflict.

1. Introduction

Teams frequently consist of people with diverse backgrounds, thrust together for very long days, who cannot leave until they have realized their goal. The pressure to come to agreement on weaknesses and arrive at a rating, combined with the appraisers' typical desire to "do the right thing" can lead to long, drawn-out arguments. The issue is made more acute when compounded with the consolidation process being the most challenging part of the SCAMPI and occurring at the end of the week and late at night when team members are already tired.

By assessing team members' behaviors, recognizing unproductive situations, and armed with team management techniques, the lead appraiser can quickly resolve these difficult issues and more efficiently come to completion of the appraisal. Not only can substantial time be saved but the findings may be more detailed and insightful. Team management techniques can also improve team productivity and morale. The team members can complete the SCAMPI proud of their insight into the organization, confident of the accuracy of their rating, and happy to work with the same team members on future SCAMPIs.

This paper discusses how casual or beginning discussions may start to stray and exhibit indicators of potential conflict. The types of problems typically encountered are described, along with "what to look for" to determine which problem is playing out. Next, techniques for re-focusing discussions are then discussed and applied to the example scenarios.

2. Identifying the Problem

To resolve these conflicts, it is important to first identify when a discussion is leading to conflict or that an argument in progress needs intervention. Lead appraisers should strive to recognize

these behaviors in the team members at the onset of any potential conflict. The way to determine this is by understanding the types of conflicts and behaviors that typically occur during a SCAMPI appraisal. Knowing when not to interfere, to allow productive conversation to progress is equally as important. Once a problem is identified and characterized, specific team management techniques can then be applied to resolve it.

Productive versus Non-productive Discussions
Productive discussions involve one or each person providing additional information leading to a mutual and consensual understanding. These discussions typically last less than 5 minutes (several iterations of discourse or less) before moving on to another, possibly related, topic. They show acknowledgement of the others' discussion points and clarify or build on each other or point out strengths and weaknesses in a constructive manner. There is little or no anxiety on the part of the participants throughout the interaction.

Non-productive discussions involve two or more people lasting more than 5 minutes (or more than four or five iterations of discourse). There may be anxiety on the part of the participants. Alternatively, a conversation may start out with no anxiety, but may grow during the course of the interaction, or may be sparked by a single statement. Anxiety during a discussion does not mean that a point won't be quickly resolved; it is one of several indicators of that possibility.

Behavioral characteristics denoting anxiety include crossed arms, raised voices, talking over others, negative reactions, people standing up, people walking around, pacing, and asking how late they have to work. Introverted people will get quiet. Side conversations will start. Observe not just the people engaged in the interaction, but the rest of the team members as well. There are typically multiple elements in play. When discourse between two team members does not come to quick resolution, that is the time to assess if any and which scenario is playing out.

Ask yourself: "Is there an obvious resolution to the issue?"

Scenario Categories -- Overview
I have created categories of issues to help characterize the root of the problem, as well as a set of resolution techniques and a table that maps each problem to the appropriate resolution technique(s). The categories of issues are;
- Personality Scenarios,
- Misunderstanding Scenarios, and
- Misinformation scenarios.

Similar techniques are typically used to deal with problems in these categories. Some scenarios fall into more than one category; in these cases, one or more techniques may be applied to resolve the situation.

Personality Scenarios
Personality scenarios result from acts on the part of one team member that are not aligned with the group's goals, or a tendency of the team member to take on an unproductive role.

Interestingly, these behaviors are often unintentional. While introversion or extroversion are not dysfunctional characteristics, if each individual doesn't manage their behaviors, the team lead will need to intervene and manage the team behaviors for them. Personality Scenarios can lead to other team members "beating up on" a particular team member, or a team member beating up on others. These scenarios are identifiable by recognizing some typical team member behaviors:

Scenario	Indicator(s)
Do anything to keep from giving a bad rating	Strongly argues against any weakness.
Can't back down, must save face	Sticks to opinion, even when it defies data or logic.
The Lecturer	Takes a very long time to state their opinion. Frequently shares opinions or anecdotes, often on minor or tangential points.
The Dominator	Talks over other team members, interrupts other team members, interjects their opinion repeatedly during team discussion
Doesn't want to go home	Repeatedly brings up minor or tangential issues.
Distracted	Overly focused on their laptop or cell phone while discussions take place, staring off into space, involved inside conversations.
Shy or Introverted	Doesn't voice any opinion for long periods of time, or until after discussion has completed or when voting occurs. Opposition vote without any prior discussion. Side conversations (wants to try their argument with a single person before bringing it to the group). Talks slowly and/or nervously
Helpers and Leavers	Usually from the home organization. Knows where the evidence can be obtained, knows logistics. In doing this, they spend time away from the appraisal team taking care of logistics. May be someone leaving to do phone calls, or spending time e-mailing, or on cell phone. In the meantime, the group cannot make formal decisions. When the Leaver returns, the mini-team or entire team needs to revisit discussions or decisions.
The Dim-Wit	Team member who is not knowledgeable about the subject matter, the SCAMPI method, or the organization, even though they have been trained.
Circular Arguers	Same point is made again and again. No one can win with them. Not listening to discussion points. Being bureaucratic. See definition of "Circular Arguers" below.

Misunderstanding Scenarios
These scenarios are based on team member miscommunications or confusion.

Scenario	Indicator(s)
Apples and oranges arguments	Discussion is about different topics.
Wants to solve the problems	Doesn't help develop weaknesses, argues against them. Asks for solutions repeatedly. Steers the conversation away from the point.
Ambiguous term	Two people get wrapped around the axle concerning one aspect of a discussion; a concept or term or are implying

	different definitions.
Multiple Issues	Statements contain more than one issue.
The Changing Opinion	As a discussion gets close to resolution, one arguer shifts their position. Result is that they never reach resolution. You may get lost trying to follow a person's argument.
Violent Agreement	Two people argue different points, where they actually agree with each other. They don't notice that they agree, they just argue. Or multiple team members keep giving examples to support the point.

Misinformation Scenarios

Misinformation scenarios are data dependent, involving insufficient or incorrect information. They include:

Scenario	Indicator(s)
Gut Feel/Nothing specific to go on	Doesn't support statement with data. Has concern about possible weakness, but lacks supporting data.
Issue spans multiple mini-teams	An argument concerning a policy or regulation spans multiple policies and regulations.
Not enough data	There isn't sufficient evidence to know whether there is a finding/gap/non-compliance or not.
Doesn't understand the project/the organization	Many new people on the assessment team. Mis-statements about the project or organization.
Lack of Subject Matter knowledge	Misstatements about the subject matter. Weaknesses are too judgmental or out of scope of the subject matter.
Disparity in interpretation of the implementation of the policies, guidelines, and subject matter	Appraisers have different backgrounds, different teachers, and different experience base. Therefore, they bring their own perspective to the discussion, which may be very disparate.

3. Team Management Techniques

The table below illustrates how these techniques can be applied to the scenarios described in Section 2. Sometimes a person may exhibit more than one of the problem scenarios at a time. These techniques may be used one at a time or in combination. It is never too late to use a technique, however, the sooner these techniques are used in conflict scenarios, the sooner the conflict will dissipate.

	Scenario	Parking Lot	Flip Chart Objectivity	Round Robin	Sleeping on it	Further Research, Getting More Data	Strategic Breaks	Analysis And Separation	Clarification of Purpose	Put Weakness in the Correct Place	Hide the Rating	Exploring a Gut Feel
Personality Scenarios	Doesn't want to go home						X		X			
	Wants to solve the problems	X							X			
	The lecturer		X	X			X				X	
	Can't back down, must save face	X	X				X				X	
	The dominator			X			X				X	
	Shy or Introverted			X			X				X	
	Anything to prevent a "PI" rating						X				X	
	The changing opinion		X	X			X				X	
	Violent agreement								X			
	The Dim-Wit					X						
Mis/ Understanding Scenarios	Apples and Oranges	X	X		X			X				
	Gut Feel	X			X	X		X				X
	Dependency on resolution of other factors	X			X	X						
	Not enough data	X			X	X						
	Multiple Issues		X		X			X		X		
Mis/ Information Scenarios	Lack of project or organizational knowledge	X			X	X						
	Lack of SME knowledge	X			X	X						
	Interpretation of the policies, guidelines, and subject matter	X	X		X					X		
	SME implementation disparity				X	X						
	Circular arguers		X		X			X				

Descriptions of Resolution Techniques

Parking Lot

Applicable to: Gut feel, Dependency on the Resolution of other Factors, Not enough data, Lack of Knowledge

A parking lot is a place to note issues or items and get them "out of the way" so that the overall discussion can continue. A flip chart or whiteboard can be used where items to be noted or discussed later are kept. Announce the use of the Parking Lot at the beginning of the consolidation process. As items come up, write them on the Parking Lot. Make sure you capture the thought correctly, but don't start acting on the item (like assigning actions), go back to the topic at hand. At the end of each day, review the items on the Parking Lot, ensure the items are clear, assign actions, as necessary.

If a discussion appears that can't be resolved quickly, it can be put in the Parking Lot. By the time that the team addresses the issues in the parking lot, many have already been resolved.

When reviewing a parking lot item where there are different opinions, the first thing to do is to see if additional data or information will resolve the difference. If additional information will resolve the difference, then assign a time to review the additional information or write and evidence request and submit it. Put a note in the parking lot to address the issue when the additional information is reviewed. The middle of team consolidation is not always the best time to do further research or to review the evidence; this is best done during a team break.

Flip Chart Objectivity

Applicable to: Multiple Issues, Circular Arguers, Can't Back Down Must Save Face and The Changing Opinion

By using this flip chart technique, you can take subjective statements or discussions and make them objective. Using a flip chart until resolution is reached maintains that objectivity throughout the course of discussion.

White boards can also work, but it's easier and quicker to "start with a new sheet of paper" using a flip chart. Flip charts also have a stronger impact on the team members because they are permanent; team members therefore tend to be more careful with their words when they go on a flip chart.

Assign a team member to be the scribe. It is best for the team lead to not be the scribe but to moderate. Nobody is allowed to debate or argue the issue. The scribe writes the issue on the flip chart. Each team member relays their perspective and understanding of the issue and the scribe writes each perspective down. This is done one team member at a time. The scribe checks with each team member to ensure that it is properly recorded. After all team members have shared their thoughts on the issue, the team lead asks if anyone has anything that they'd like to add. If a team member wants to change what they have previously written the scribe modifies it on the flip chart. If a team member continues to argue or debate the issue, the team lead asks if they have something to add to what they documented on the flip chart or if they want to change it.

Frequently by the time everyone's perspectives are documented, the issue is resolved. If it is not resolved, then the team lead determines the technique for resolution by assessing 1) if more

information or data is needed, 2) if there is an understanding issue, 3) or if it is a personality issue. Sometimes a team member is embarrassed to appear wrong and doesn't want to change their mind publicly. This is best dealt with by parking lotting the issue and dealing with it later; it may go away on its own.

For shy team members, it's important to facilitate their interaction to bring out their insights. Even when a formal flip-chart technique is not used, it can be helpful to ask explicitly for the shy person's comments or insights. Helping them share their opinions in a low-threat environment can also help them to bond with other team members and remove some of their shyness within the SCAMPI environment.

Analysis and Separation
Applicable to: Apples and Oranges, Multiple Issues, Ambiguous Term
A statement may contain more than one issue. As soon as a conflict surfaces between two team members, the team lead needs to determine if the team members are arguing one issue or two or more different issues. Determine which terms are ambiguous and define them out loud with the group. Explicitly decide which issue to address first. Identify any additional data or evidence that can resolve the issue. Parking Lotting the other issue(s) may be helpful until each is dealt with individually.

Round Robin
Applicable to: Dominator, Lecturer, Shy, Must Save Face, The changing opinion
To resolve a variety of Personality and Misinformation scenarios a Round Robin technique can be used. The basic rules of the Round Robin technique are:
1) Weakness/Issue/Noncompliance presenter explains their position
2) Go through the mini-team one by one, allowing each to add to or clarify the Weakness presenter's explanation
3) SCAMPI members on other mini-teams raise their hands and are called upon by the SCAMPI team leader in turn. The team lead may need to write the team members names on a white board on note pad, to remember the sequence.
4) The first person that is called upon voices their objection or request for clarification.
5) The only person allowed to respond is the Weakness presenter first, then the other mini-team members. The rest of the team is not allowed to participate other than to listen and take notes.
6) The first person is than allowed to follow-up with the Weakness presenter (and the mini-team, if necessary).
7) Only after the first person's issues are resolved by discussion with the Weakness presenter and the mini-team, or the issue is Parking Lotted, then the team lead can address the second team member who has questions or issues.
8) The second team member deals only with the Weakness presenter and the mini-team. No other team members are allowed to interject.
9) All team members requesting to participate in the discussion can do so continuing in the manner described above.
10) This continues until the issue is resolved or Parking Lotted.

Round Robins can help in cases where there is the potential of the SCAMPI team ganging up on the individual or mini-team, or with dominators/lecturers.

During a Round Robin, a Lecturer may take a very long time to state their opinion. In this case, it is best to set time limits for each person's turn, for example, each person has two minutes to state their opinion or thought. Have another team member be the timekeeper.

Sleeping on it
Applicable to: All problem situations
Sometimes a resolution can't be seen immediately and continuing to work the issue doesn't help. The first step is to identify when it is happening and Parking Lot it for the time. If the first parking lot review does not resolve the issue, you can assign homework to the team members to think about what would help them come to resolution. The next morning during the team meeting, it can be brought up again for discussion and hopefully, resolution. A request for more evidence may help, or the team members in disagreement may have a new understanding in the morning. If not, continue to Parking Lot the issue until the last possible time that it has to be decided.

Schedule Reminders
Applicable to: Doesn't want to go home, and Wants to Solve the Problems
For team members that won't accept a weakness and move on, determine if they have an unstated agenda. If they just don't want to go home, remind them of the schedule as needed.   For team members that want a solution for each weakness, explain the purpose of the SCAMPI. Don't be afraid to repeat as needed. When team members are happy to stay late, reminding them of the schedule has to be bounded with what must be achieved by a given time, such as, "we will work until 9:00 PM, and we must get through the next 10 Process Areas". Remind the team of how long it has taken to complete one process area and that the rate must be improved.

Doing More Research/Getting More Data
Applicable to: Apples-Oranges, Not enough data, Lack of project or organizational knowledge, Interpretation of the CMMI/Subject Matter, CMMI/Subject Matter implementation disparity, Gut Feel
When there is a conflict, one of the very first questions a team lead should ask is: Is there enough information to resolve the issue? The team lead can ask the dissenting team members: what would change your opinion to the opposition's? What data would you need to see? Many times this will prompt a request for more evidence. The new evidence, or lack thereof, may than change one of the dissenter's positions. Many times, a pointed question to an individual associated with the project itself can provide the required insight to resolve the issue.

Identifying if additional data or evidence will resolve the issue is one way to determine if there are multiple issues for an Apples-Oranges scenario. The team leader needs to quickly make this determination, and deal with each issue separately.

Getting to the root cause of a disagreement quickly will help in choosing the correct resolution. Verify that the dissenting team members have a complete understanding of the intent of the

CMMI/Subject Matter by reviewing the relevant portion of the CMMI/Subject Matter aloud for your benefit and the teams. Look up definitions in the glossary. This is helpful for new team members, as well as for experienced members.

Exploring a Gut Feel
Applicable to: Gut Feel
With a gut feel, the participant may have the thoughts and facts to support their position, but simply cannot thread them together in a verbally cohesive finding. By working with the group to understand what's at the root of the concern, the assessment team can bring to light more valid and useful findings. Instead of immediately dispelling the issue, ask the team member what led them to think this might be an issue.

Sometimes Gut Feel issues are insights into deeper organizational issues. Insight into the organization can be picked up by pieces of conversation and from evidence that our brains may be putting together subconsciously. One of the greatest benefits of a SCAMPI team is sharing these gut feelings and discussing it as a team. Other team members may be able to build on the initial thought until something tangible is produced. A gut instinct may lead to exploring a process more deeply, looking at additional evidence, or asking more questions in a follow-up interview. This may lead to resolution and no further weaknesses are discovered, or it may uncover a significant weakness in the organization.

Putting the Weakness in the Correct Place
Applicable to: Apples and Oranges, Multiple Issues, Lack of CMMI/Subject Matter Knowledge, Interpretation of the CMMI/Subject Matter, CMMI/Subject Matter Implementation Disparity
Sometimes there will be a disagreement about a weakness. One person may say that it doesn't address a specific policy/regulation/guideline, etc. Check if the weakness is not true, or not true for the policy. Many a disagreement can be resolved just by putting the weakness in the correct place. Check if the weakness better addresses another policy or regulation.

Strategic Breaks
Applicable to: Many of the personality scenarios
It is easy to get caught up in debate while time passes. Taking a team break can renew everyone's energy and spirit. It provides the opportunity for people to save face and for peaceful resolution during the break, team members can let off steam.

Hide The Ratings
Applicable to: Many of the personality scenarios
Team members may think discussion of potential weaknesses means failure of the organization or of themselves. People sometimes have a hard time disconnecting weaknesses from the ratings-- they equate any weakness with failure. Also, if they are from the home organization or a stakeholder in it, they may take the perception of a weakness personally. In these cases, just discussing a potential weakness may make people defensive or argumentative.

The resolution to this is simple: write and show the weaknesses while hiding the ratings (even if they are still blank). This visually removes the idea of a rating and allows people to discuss the weakness without having to deal with its ramifications.

Suggestions for Implementing Team Techniques
Whether or not a team member's input is helpful, still thank them. This prevents them from becoming defensive. If an individual does not understand the results, help them understand what the group is looking for, be patient and explain. If they don't understand the conclusion, you don't have consensus.

Start by just observing. You don't need to wait for the next SCAMPI (where you are typically under a lot of time and organizational pressure); most of these scenarios occur frequently in general meetings. Learn to recognize them; make notes when you see them occur. Later, go back to the descriptions and suggestions above and think through how they might play out if you used the appropriate team technique.

When you have opportunity to apply these techniques during an actual SCAMPI, don't be disappointed if you recognize a particular scenario too late, when there's no longer the chance to affect the discussion. Do remember how you arrived at the conclusion; this will build up your insights and improve your reaction time. The next time the situation occurs, you may well recognize it in time and successfully resolve it.

4. Conclusion

Many of these scenarios can happen during a SCAMPI. Sometimes, more than one will occur simultaneously. Knowing these Team Management Techniques can help to diffuse the stressful situations. Be patient as you learn to recognize scenarios and be proactive in diffusing them. In time, it will become second nature and an important tool in your SCAMPI toolbox. The appraisal team members will appreciate your guidance and leadership. This keeps the appraisal calm, fun, and enables a team to interact optimally, and will lead to easier, higher quality SCAMPIs.