



# Putting Our Cards on the Table :

## Discussing Friction in the Collaborative Exhibition Process

by John Chiodo

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Like any group process, the team approach to exhibition development generates its share of disagreements, conflict, and friction. This despite having been the norm for many years. There are many helpful articles and books written on the subject that diagnose causes and recommend measures to avoid the negative effects and profit from the positive challenges that conflict can bring. This article identifies areas of friction that can develop between team members from within institutions and with consulting firms. Collaborative friction can have a variety of causes, including differences in working styles, cultures, and organizational structures; financial constraints; and misunderstandings about accountability. The complexity of the team dynamic creates an environment where poorly understood patterns of conflict can lie disguised, mislabeled, or simply lurk unspoken under the surface of politeness. Typically these patterns tend to appear in less experienced teams, or between team members with little familiarity with each other. The following examples represent repeating patterns of conflict I have seen over the years, pointing to a need for more open discussion of the patterns and more careful management of the collaborative process.

The following examples are based upon hard-earned personal and shared observations from the last 25 years working in teams made up of in-house museum staff and design consultants engaged in developing new interpretive exhibitions or museums. They are from the perspective of this design consultant and they are offered in the spirit of sharing perceptions from direct experience. While the examples below may seem like a stark representation of the “dark side” of the collaborative process, I prefer to work collaboratively, advocate

its benefits, and find it to be an immensely rewarding experience. Early in my career I had some experience working from within an institution where I became familiar with the internal factors that drive the in-house exhibition development process. Since then, my professional experience has been as a consultant, and for the last ten years my role on design teams has been as a design director. In that role it has been incumbent upon me to also develop a better understanding of these issues from the museum’s perspective.

In my experience, the most common patterns of conflict in the team process fall under the following five headings.

- Underestimating the Cost of Innovation
- Misconceptions in Setting a Worthy Yet (Un)Achievable Target
- Difficulties in Grounding an Evolving Process
- Challenges in Reaching the Target Together
- Confusion Between Vision and Team Authorship

In all of the examples below, both the museum staff and consultants began the process by discussing ground rules for working together, strategies for joint goal setting, and procedures for keeping the project on track. Nevertheless, issues arose that seemed to defy such proactive preparation. The players consisted of various combinations of the following:

**In-House Team:** In-house director, exhibit designer, content experts, educators, facility manager, project manager, appointed trustee representative. **Consulting Team:** Lead designer, exhibit and graphic designers, content developers, and project manager. **Joint Team:** Combination of In-house and Consulting Teams.

## **Underestimating the “Price” of Innovation**

**Project Example:** *New exhibitions for a small facility transitioning to a large museum.*

During the early stages of this project, the director and trustee made a well intentioned and impassioned appeal that the consulting team work with their staff to “push the envelope” and search for the most “cutting edge solutions” to create a truly “innovative” visitor experience. Most consultants have heard this before, and the consultant team tested the waters to see just how far the client was willing to go to be innovative. We reminded the client that innovation required the institution to step out of its comfort zone and to take on some calculated risks. However, it was difficult for the institution to internally agree upon the limits of its comfort zone regarding risk. This lack of defined parameters for innovation created issues among all team members regarding how hard to push the mandate to be cutting edge. It eventually led to some mixed messages from senior staff to the consulting team—on one hand not delivering enough originality but on the other hand creating too much risk. Early in the process, ideas collaborated upon by the joint team were dismissed by the senior staff because they had been “done before.” This put the entire joint team on the defensive having to validate less “original” concepts by demonstrating how proven solutions could contribute to a superior visitor experience. Eventually the joint team split along ideological lines where one side struggled to convince the other to focus on excellence rather than originality for its own sake.

As the project wore on the joint team proposed more innovative concepts, such as experiences that might be a bit more challenging or

controversial to visitors. This triggered some risk-averse behavior from decision makers within the institution towards proposals that were perceived as unfamiliar, controversial, or required additional research and development. As the perception of risk became more tangible the innovation mandate seemed to morph into an “off-the-shelf,” “play it safe” mandate. This led to additional friction between elements of the joint team, as it required the redesign of some of the exhibits.

### **Observations**

This example is common in the design practice, and experienced team members usually have strategies for educating the less experienced on what it means to innovate. However, because it is a common issue, it should be more openly addressed. Before embarking on a mission of “innovation” any institution must realistically assess the acceptable level of risk it is willing to take, and then match its goals with what’s achievable in that envelope. True innovation requires risk taking, dealing with the unfamiliar, and stepping out of the institution’s comfort zone. It also requires more time and resources to test and refine new ideas. All of these ramifications of innovation need to be understood by a project team before it embarks on a “cutting edge” endeavor.

### **Setting a Worthy Yet (Un)Achievable Target**

**Project Example:** *New exhibitions for a growing medium sized museum.*

Working with the museum team, the consultant team set goals for the project. Initial brainstorming revealed ambitious needs and desires. For the consultant team, many items listed were worthy yet they weren’t all achievable given the resources allotted. The next step was to help the in-house team identify

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and benchmark a set of goals that were more appropriate. As discussions ensued and the project proceeded, it became clear that the mindset at this institution was that anything was possible if everyone worked hard enough and made enough sacrifices. Exacerbating the challenge was the additional burden that mounting several new exhibitions would place on in-house staff who already had full schedules. Friction developed whenever we attempted to tailor the client's expectations toward something more reasonable. As the in-house staff worked increasingly long and difficult hours they became more intractable whenever there was a disagreement between teams. Untenable expectations also extended to what could be accomplished with the exhibition budget. This contributed to the level of conflict between teams as each side wrestled with what could be achieved. As the project wore on the two teams became increasingly polarized as mutual trust eroded. The consultant team pushed on to deliver what was possible while the client team became increasingly pessimistic. When the new exhibitions opened, they were not as interactive as the client team would have liked, but everyone agreed they were a great improvement over the previous exhibitions and raised the overall quality level of the museum's visitor experience.

### **Observations**

Setting the bar too high for given resources is a recipe for conflict, but who is the best judge of this? Frankly, goal setting can also get unnecessarily contentious as a result of stubborn consultant behavior. It is important for consultants to understand that we are being compensated to please the client (accept and meet their goals) and to look out for the client's best interests, as we can best understand

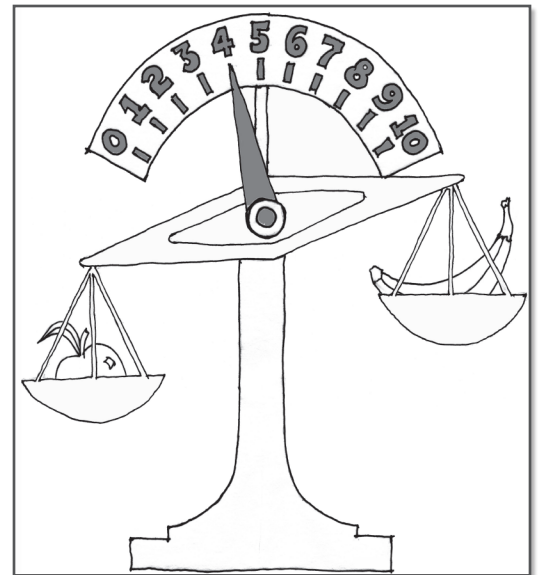


Figure 1 "Balancing Act" can help an institution clarify its position and free up a polarized team to find common ground. Courtesy of the author.

them. The last five words in the previous sentence represent an area of consultant/client collaboration where the skillful practices of listening, accepting, judging, communicating, and advising are required to make the difference between ease and friction, satisfaction or exasperation. Sometimes well-intentioned consultants can be tempted to tacitly accept the client's brief but nevertheless maintain misgivings about particular goals and targets set by the in-house team. When powerless to question those goals, consultants can unconsciously disregard them in their work.

There is an exercise that some teams use at the beginning of a project that helps an institution see its own predisposition or bias toward issues that will drive the direction of a design solution. It's a kind of institutional personality test that clarifies which way an institution leans regarding a series of design issues. Using the Balancing Act, (figure 1) the institutional stakeholders are interviewed to identify their comfort level between two extremes on a number of key topics to define an institutions position on issues affecting the design of a new exhibition. An example of one question is, "On a scale of one to ten, how comfortable are you addressing controversial issues?" By conducting this assessment and then discussing its results with the client, consultants can assist the entire project team in setting realistic goals for a project.

## Is the in-house team realistic about what it is capable of accomplishing with the schedule, budget, and human resources?

Conflicts regarding innovation and the setting of achievable targets can arise when assumptions and stated priorities are not well aligned with risk aversion and available resources. These sources of friction can be avoided if early in the process, as goals are set, the joint team establishes tools for answering these questions:

- Can we get there from here or are we being overly idealistic?
- Is the senior staff fully aware of, and realistic about the in-house team resources required to carry out the effort?
- Is the in-house team realistic about what it is capable of accomplishing with the schedule, budget, and human resources?
- Are the consultants over-promising and playing along to keep everybody happy?
- Are the consultants being good listeners and providing objective feedback?

### **Grounding a Moving Target**

**Project Example:** *New exhibition for a new medium sized facility.*

While working on an interactive visitor center, difficulties began to arise in determining what constituted a successful interactive exhibit. Originally it was agreed that it was sufficient for the visitor to gain an understanding of the basic principles that each interactive was to demonstrate. As the in-house team reviewed the developing interactives they perceived opportunities to “raise the bar,” and interactive exhibits were now to deliver a more nuanced experience for the visitor. For example, an interactive would have to elucidate the many variations in the way the principles portrayed actually worked in the real world. As each iteration attempted to meet the revised goals, the in-house team continued to observe new opportunities to convey content and added

more requirements. Thus goals and criteria for evaluating the success of an interactive kept being re-interpreted, leading to friction between the two teams. As this was an unexpected development there were no rules of engagement, and the criteria for a successful interactive became a matter of opinion. Additionally, in order to meet the expanding criteria, the complexity of the interactives grew, which became problematic. Subsequent reviews became fear-inducing events. Eventually, many of the interactives had to be abandoned as their increasing complexity and the weight of new requirements made them unworkable.

### **Observations**

In this instance what started as a constructive process eroded and slid out of control because the joint team was chasing a moving target where the ground rules were being ignored. This example also demonstrates that during the design process, all of those objectives and criteria set out at the beginning of the effort can unexpectedly evolve as discoveries are made and the team learns what is possible and doable. If planned, this can be a positive effect. To keep things on track, the way these new discoveries affect the evaluation of new designs must be kept explicit, and measures of success kept realistic. The team should exercise self-discipline regarding what is desirable versus what is doable. The first step is to agree on the terms for success, and the second step is to agree on how to handle things when those terms need to change. If a more open-ended design process is dictated by the goals of the project or the design problem, (especially with complex interactives) the schedule and budget must be crafted to allow for a flexible evolving process.

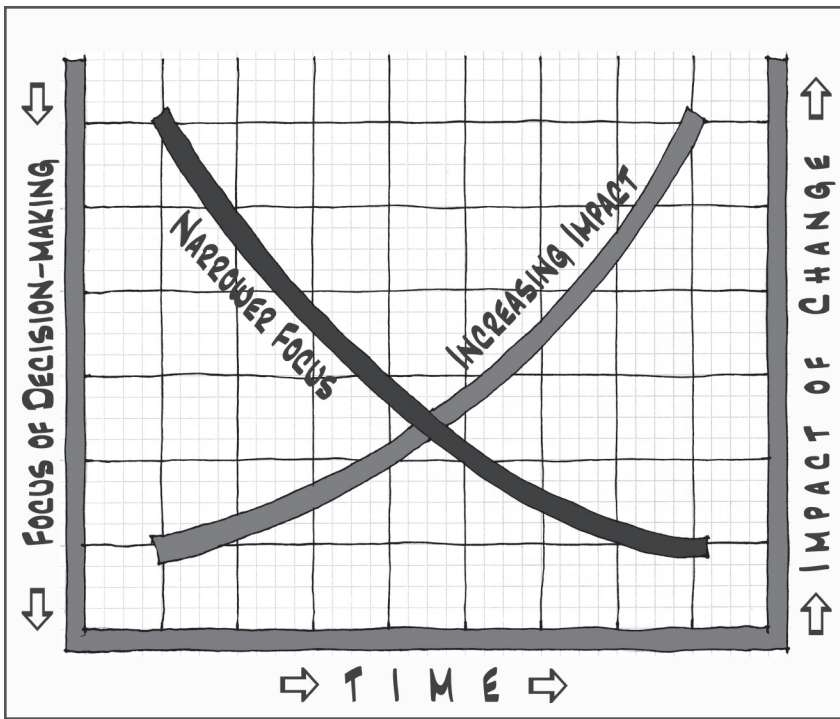


Figure 2 "Flexibility Curve" illustrates the disruptive potential of making changes late in the design process. Courtesy of the author.

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On the other hand, it is not uncommon for consultants to underestimate or misunderstand the client's commitment to a set of ideals with stated objectives. All of the above examples illustrate that within any team there can be a number of concealed beliefs and concepts. Members of newly formed teams need to listen and educate each other so that all have an equivalent understanding of the value and cost of modifying a goal or an element of a project. It's a good idea for a joint team and institution to review the natural decision making arc through which every project passes, especially for anyone who might be new to large scale projects.

In design school we were all taught that the design process does not have a "natural" end, but that we assign an arbitrary point at which the process is concluded based on a set of criteria. In a perfect world the design process would be utterly open-ended and every desirable discovery and opportunity could be incorporated into a project. There are two principles that can be disregarded in the name of "creative freedom" thus rendering the design process unsustainable.

The principle of narrowing flexibility is

represented in the Flexibility Curve (figure 2). This illustrates that over the timeline of a project, the capacity to alter the design of the project diminishes (without great impact to cost and schedule). It further illustrates the narrowing of decision making through the design process—at first the focus and decision making is on a broader scale, and gradually becomes finer and more detailed as the design process progresses. This principle sounds like common sense, but it can be dismissed by earnest team members who perceive it to suppress creativity.

The second principle governs the effect that optimizing quality, cost and schedule have on each other, what we used to call the "Iron Triangle of Death" (figure 3). Simply put, you can't have it good, fast, and cheap; one of these three criteria needs to take a back seat to the other two.

The "moving target" patterns of conflict described above arise due to insufficient commitment to a process and direction, even though guidelines are set at the beginning of a project. These sources of friction can be avoided if early in the process the joint team establishes tools for answering these questions:

## Are the consultants over-promising and playing along to keep everybody happy?

- Are we clearly defining the criteria for success and using the same measuring stick?
- Are we clear on our logic and rationale for using the measuring stick in the same way?
- Are the goals and conditions of satisfaction evolving as the process unfolds?
- Is the scope of work creeping outward because the design process doesn't fit the type of solutions sought?
- Are inordinately large changes in the design being made late in the project timeline?
- Have resources and time been adequately allocated for a more open-ended process, and criteria set for concluding it within those limits (or a procedure defined for increasing resources)?
- Are we trying to create something really good, really fast, but really cheap?

### Difficulties in Reaching the Goal Together

**Project Example:** *New exhibitions for a medium facility transitioning to a new large one.*

Our consulting firm was invited to work with an in-house team for a museum seeking to redesign and reinvent itself. From the start both teams knew that the process of sharing authorship on a demanding creative effort was going to have its challenges. We would need to establish mutual respect and trust. We would need to ground this mutual understanding in the direct experiences of the two teams working as one.

All of this would require an open mind, a commitment of time, and a sense of shared responsibility from all members of both teams. In this example friction occurred when

members of either team began to feel that “their” ideas were not getting acknowledged, discussed, or included. This manifested itself when team members became dismissive of each other’s input: someone’s idea might die on the table because no one would speak out either to support it or critique it. The effect of this was an uncomfortable undercurrent that slowly factionalized the team, and eventually turned into anger. Each team member began experiencing these “slights” as personal, and because it was not discussed openly, did not realize that this was a systemic team dynamic.

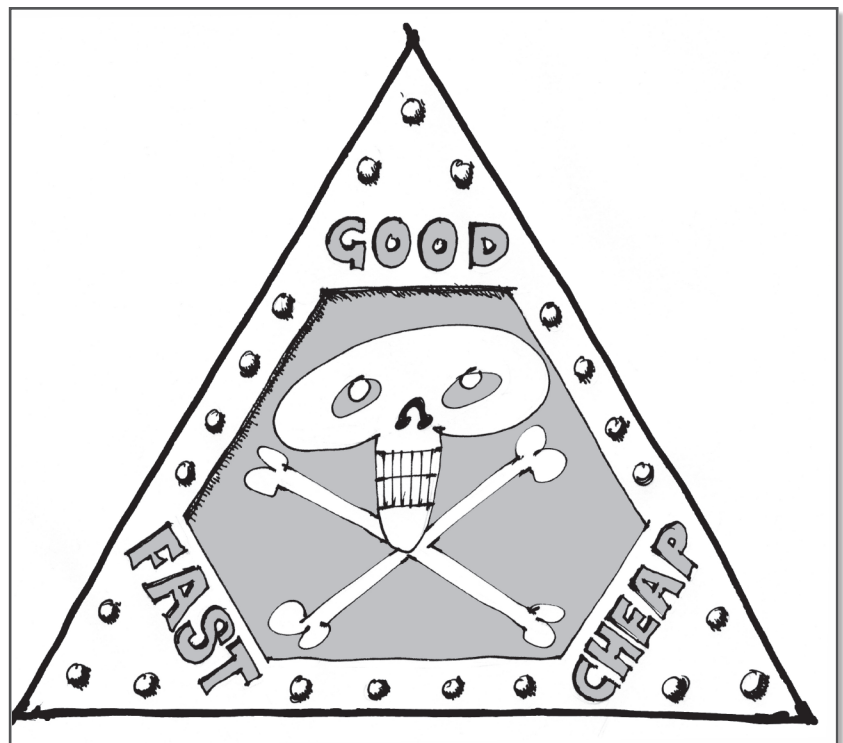


Figure 3 “Iron Triangle of Death” is a reminder that when setting goals for quality, cost and speed—optimizing more than any two can be problematic. Courtesy of the author.

## The goals and criteria for evaluating the success of an interactive kept being re-interpreted....

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### **Observations**

When we hear an idea that is very different from our own, we can perceive it as too alien, too troublesome and therefore easy to discount and dismiss. Teams steeped in different experiences can find themselves in this situation, both individually and as a group. This is where open-mindedness is essential; the team leaders need to encourage their respective teams to give each other’s ideas a chance to see what might be possible. This includes the team leaders themselves, who sometimes just want to stick to what seems to work, to move on for the sake of expediency.

Working toward a goal together can also be fractious when consultants have a preferred way of designing that may not fit the client’s desires. Friction can occur when teams do not agree on expectations about whose and which ideas are integrated into the overall design. This can get tricky if one team gets favorable treatment and the other finds itself a second-class collaborator. This can cut both ways: senior staff wishing to give the outside design consultants more free reign may disenfranchise the in-house team. Or, on the other hand, the in-house team can enjoy favored status, while the outside design consultants are the bad guys. Double standards like these are highly corrosive to the trust and respect that all teams need to thrive.

Conflicts regarding reaching the end goal together arose in the above example due to barriers to working as a larger, open-minded team. These sources of friction could have been avoided if early in the process the joint team had established tools for answering these questions:

- Are the expectations and procedures for sharing authorship set?

- Are the same standards being applied to everyone on the team?
- Are the team members actively coping with their own cognitive dissonance?
- Is there an explicit and fair standard for including and integrating diverse ideas from the joint team?

### **Confusion Between Vision and Team Authorship**

Can vision be a “we” thing? Given all the friction that can occur within collaborative teams seeking to create a singular vision, is it all worth it? Is it really possible to create a single vision through a democratic team effort? Arguments for a team-based vision include the following: that a team can generate a greater variety of good ideas, and that the chemistry that occurs when ideas are blended can bring about more original solutions. The argument against a team vision (or at least a joint team vision) is that a true fusion never really occurs; the best you can hope for is a tight amalgamation that never really comes together into a coherent and grand vision. Should we even worry about there being a singular vision and rejoice in a more eclectic constellation of experiences loosely revolving around a big idea?

In most cases, the strength of a staged experience depends on whether all the pieces come together into a clear powerful vision. In my experience the designation of a critical player on the overall team makes the difference. This is a person who has the specific ability to integrate the thinking and proposals of others into a coherent whole; someone respected and trusted by the rest of team, with an open mind and checked ego; someone who is able to step in and literally channel the hopes and desires as well as ideas and concepts from the team

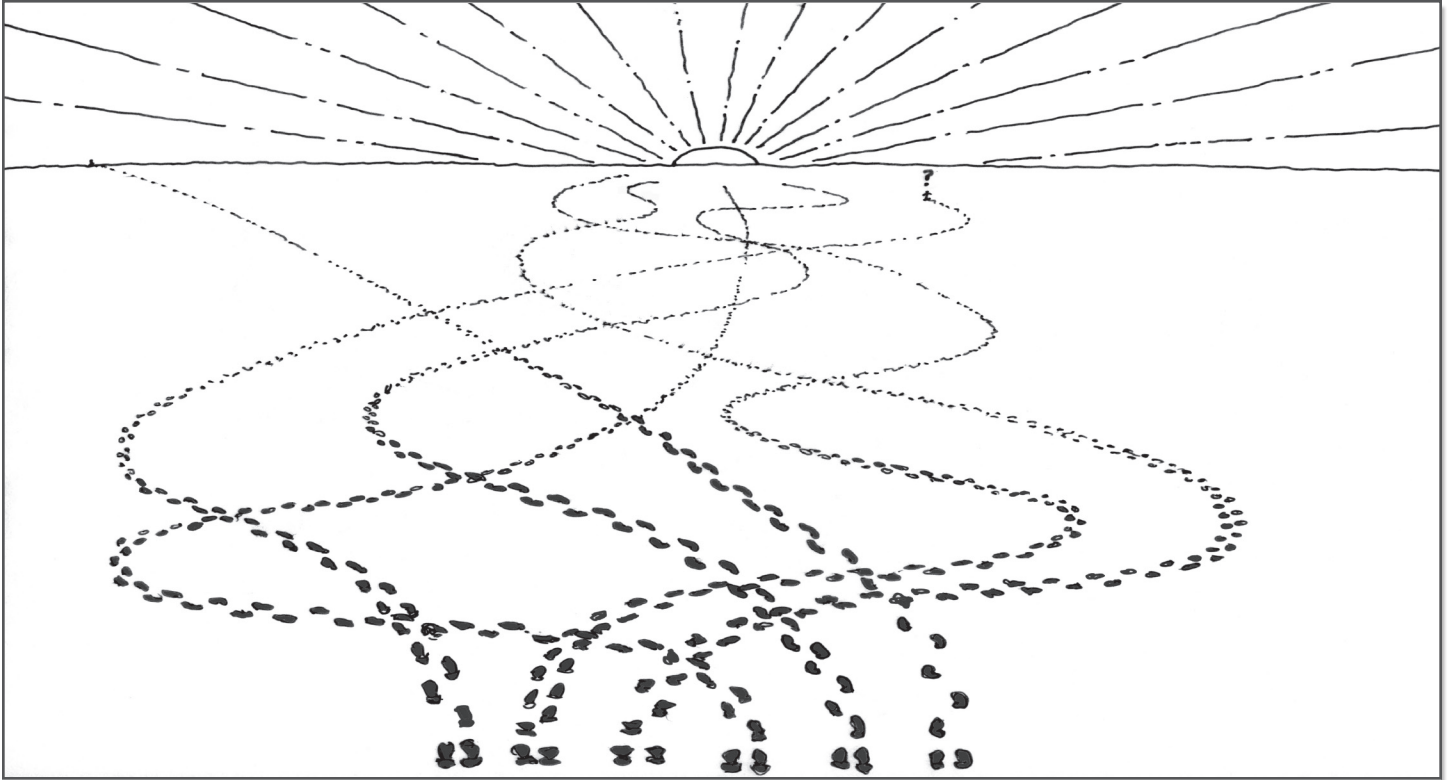


Figure 4 Reaching the goal together with a team vision. Courtesy of the author.

into a coherent whole. This is decidedly not the “I’ll know it when I see it” brand of visioning. Team vision is forged by someone assimilating and embracing the group think, recognizing the vague outlines of a vision while it is still taking shape, and then communicating it clearly and successfully back to the group. This leadership position can be filled either by an in-house team member or by a member of the design consultant firm (in either case, accountable to the stakeholders of the project). This leader helps the group to recognize what solutions are bringing that vision into better focus and which are weakening it, so that they can be winnowed out. This is the act of visioning.

#### Summary

While every situation is unique, the awareness of these and other patterns of conflict in team settings is the first step toward their effective management. This must be followed by the openness to communicate about friction when it occurs, the effort to troubleshoot possible solutions, and the will to act. While leadership is needed to manage the negative effects of team friction and solidify a vision, it is ultimately the individual responsibility of everyone on a team. This is a “life-long” skill, and the trademark of a mature professional. ✨