Managing Conflict: In the Shadow of the City

As the ‘In the Shadow of the City’ case illustrates, conflict management (as defined by Whetten and Cameron) is a necessary part of the smooth functioning of any type of organization. Even between people like Jember and Alec, whose altruistic goals overlap to a large degree, conflict can arise from a number of sources, spin out of control, and become a barrier to the continued functioning of, in this case, a development project. While the text emphasizes the need to choose the correct type of conflict management response, real world managers do not work with full information. A testament to the necessity of getting to know your employees and co-workers!

In reviewing the case, I would propose the following steps toward alleviating the tension, frustration, and misunderstanding that has arisen between Jember and Alec:

1. Ask Penny at Band Aid to serve as an intermediary. Though some students in class disagreed that the level of tension and frustration between Jember and Alec was not at a serious enough level to require an intermediary, I believe it is better to err on the side of overreaction. Penny can tailor her responses and the manner in which she handles the situation to the sense she gets from Alec and Jember. Consultation can happen over coffee or in a boardroom. The public incidences that resulted in feelings of humiliation for both Jember and Alec are, I believe, to emotionally charged to be worked out between the two of them alone.

2. Have Penny speak with both parties alone. My initial response was to have them meet together, but as a fellow student pointed out in class, Penny is more likely to hear more honest and complete answers from them alone. From this point, Penny can help ease any hurt feelings through explaining each side to the other person before they meet together in the next step. Here, I think it would be important to emphasize the mutual respect that exists between the two of them.

3. Next, I would have Alec and Jember write out—write out because it lends a certain level of clarity and permanence to one’s view—each person’s goals for the development project, beginning with the very general and working toward the more specific. These lists should then be revised to the point where Penny sees a logical flow and can recognize clearly where Jember and Alec differ, and where their goals are similar.
4. Then, I would have Penny request from Alec and Jember a list of what steps—again beginning with the general and moving toward the specific—are necessary to achieve the goals laid out in step three. At this point I would also ask Jember and Alec to include a list of goals and means that they think the other person does not agree with or understand. This can serve as a basis from which to begin a more in-depth discussion. I have found that if people have something to refer to—even if it is just a paper on which they wrote down their ideas—the discussion remains more focused and less emotional.

5. Using the lists of goals, means, and perceived misunderstandings, Penny can moderate a conversation between Jember and Alec that begins with their shared goals and means. From this point they can discuss the areas they disagree on—focusing on how their unique backgrounds lead them to their opinions. Such a focus would enable Jember and Alec to understand where the other person is coming from and learn something about the other person’s logic. This understanding can form the grounds for compromise on certain issues like budgeting, future goals, and management style.

6. In following, they should collectively lay out a future plan for the project—in detail so as to avoid any serious misunderstanding about the central goals and means of the project. Here, Penny’s own experience in working in development will be especially useful. A consultation mechanism between Jember and Alec should also be decided so future misunderstandings can be addressed before they spin out of control.

Clearly, this is a rough outline of a consultation strategy. It will have to be tailored as the details become more complicated. In my own experience such a framework has served me well. I would appreciate any comments on how this general framework could be improved for the management of future conflict in my own career!