

What is conflict?

Beginners are always told to have conflict in every scene. Keep that story moving! But what *is* conflict?

Too often it is taken to mean an "Odd Couple's" squabbling. That's an easy and obvious conflict. For instance, she's an urban animal, into cappuccino and corporate power games, he works a small ranch and loves the land; they are thrown together when her company decides to develop land next to his; they meet as enemies, but sparks fly.... Many an amusing and sexy novel has been written on the premise of opposites attracting as much as they repel, but this is not the only form conflict can or should take.

Conflict can be more subtle, more complex, more interesting than "she says tomayto, he says tomahto." Conflict is opposing desires, mismatches, uncertainty, deadlines, pressures, incompatible goals, uneasiness, tension. We are all caught up in some of these conflicts every day. And so should your characters. A convincing story has many conflicts built into it, layered and connected. The first layer is inside your characters. Once you know what these are, you can use them to make the conflicts between the characters more convincing and interesting.

A character's inner conflict is not just being in two minds about something, not just being torn between obvious incompatibles ("I want to be a priest, and yet I love her") but is about being in a new situation where old attitudes and habits war with and hinder the need for change. For instance, a man who drives himself to succeed because he doesn't want to be like his happy-go-lucky father is suddenly confronted with a situation where he isn't winning. Or an executive discovers that her ambition to be vice president of her company is being thwarted by her own self-doubt. This war inside each of your characters makes them act and react in complex ways.

You show these internal conflicts not by means of internal dialogue (which is a cop-out and is dull), but by showing your characters responding to their own inner compulsions. She, for instance, decides to confront her own self-doubts by taking on a no-win project where the local people are opposing a development. She is determined to be hard-nosed, prove she's vice-president material. He is always confrontational, fearing that one minute of negotiation would be the first step to becoming a wimp like his father. You have a grade-A opposites-attract situation here, yet it is believable because we understand why each of them is acting the way they do, why they are foolishly stubborn, why it's important for each of them to win.

A character's inner conflict can be between what he thinks he wants and what he really wants. The rancher thinks he wants to be free of sissy emotion, but if he

checked inside himself he'd find he was starving for love. The executive thinks she wants to work at head office, but actually she would be happier managing a regional branch. Each acts on this misunderstanding of his or her real desires or needs. The interest and tension in the story come as your characters realise (slowly or as a lightning-bolt) that, despite what they think they want, their actions always seemed aimed at some other goal. She keeps modifying the project to meet his environmental demands, despite knowing that head office won't like it, doing it because it feels like the right thing to do. He keeps engineering confrontations with that "stuck up yuppie" and he doesn't know why -- but we do.

A good story has more than two people in it. Give the rancher a foreman, a friend of the rancher's father. They disagree about what the company is doing: the rancher thinks it's wrong, the foreman sees its good points. Incompatible goals are a good source of conflict. Here are two men who have worked together for years, suddenly on opposite sides of the fence. One works for the other, yet is the older man, so we have tensions between different sorts of authority and respect.

Secondary characters, like the foreman, also need their own inner conflicts, though the reader will only see these through the eyes of the main characters. The foreman could secretly want to bring peace between the rancher and his friend, the rancher's father, yet be reluctant to give up his role as proxy dad. What does he do? His inner conflicts make him a real person with his own motivation, and therefore as compelling in his own smaller role as the rancher and the executive are in their larger roles. A good story is when everyone comes alive.

Your layers of conflict can be used to delay realisations (will that stubborn rancher never understand his compulsion to keep squabbling with the executive?) or to create dramatic reversals (just as she's about to win, the executive's self-doubt rears up its ugly head. Is it the same old fear of failure, or is she reluctant to triumph over the rancher? What will she choose?) By combining and interweaving conflicts on many levels, both internal and external, you instantly make your story rich, messy, vibrant, real.

Conflict must always be resolved, and every layer you create needs its closure. A satisfying and economical way of achieving this is to use one big knot to close two or more conflicts together in the same action or in a double whammy, where one leads ineluctably to the next.

You resolve your central conflict by choosing a winner. Victory for one character is obviously defeat for another, and both must resolve more than the central conflict alone. The point of victory, if it's to be more than simply a moment of self-congratulation, has to give the winning character a final insight or a sudden moment of truth. The executive wins, but in the moment of victory she accepts what she has

long suspected: that she deliberately modified the project to ensure that she would be kept in the regional office. She realises ruefully that she's no longer a driven big-city yuppie, but a woman who wants to live among friends. That final, culminating realisation or sudden bolt of truth doesn't have to be a wonderful moment, but it does have to be a convincing one. It has to resolve the tension you've created. We should finish your book convinced it could have happened no other way.

The executive has won the battle and, despite the fact that she changed the project because of him, the rancher thinks he's a loser like his father. He feels beaten, worthless, and vulnerable. For the first time he asks for help. His foreman, faced with the need to be a true friend, meets his moment of testing and resolves it by advising: talk to your father. So the rancher does, and has his own revelation: he has been equating love with failure. His defeat (resolution one) makes the foreman live up to his own sense of duty (resolution two) and that leads to the rancher shaking hands with his father (resolution three) and discovering his true inner self (resolution four, the big one). How do you show, in action, that the rancher's revelation is also a life-changing one? He's a man who acts on his principles: let him do it here. The executive tentatively suggests they work together as business partners. He challenges her, saying he demands a life-long deal: husband and wife. And the rancher wins.

Each layer of conflict has been resolved in a daisy chain of inter-connectedness, one closure bringing the closure of another. The executive achieves a goal she truly wants. The rancher achieves the goal he didn't know he wanted. They both have achieved their goals through the resolution of all the layers of conflict you established at the beginning. So go on, give your story that traditional resolution: the kiss.

And the foreman? He's achieved his goal being a good friend to both the son and the father. His reward? The two old men go fishing, and he catches the big one.

What is Conflict? Definitions and Assumptions About Conflict

We define conflict as **a disagreement through which the parties involved perceive a threat to their needs, interests or concerns**. Within this simple definition there are several important understandings that emerge:

Disagreement - Generally, we are aware there is some level of difference in the positions of the two (or more) parties involved in the conflict. But the true disagreement versus the perceived disagreement may be quite different from one another. In fact, conflict tends to be accompanied by significant levels of misunderstanding that exaggerate the perceived disagreement considerably. If we can understand the true areas of disagreement, this will help us solve the right problems and manage the true needs of the parties.

Parties involved - There are often disparities in our sense of who is involved in the conflict. Sometimes, people are surprised to learn they are a party to the conflict, while other times we are shocked to learn we are not included in the disagreement. On many occasions, people who are seen as part of the social system (e.g., work team, family, company) are influenced to participate in the dispute, whether they would personally define the situation in that way or not. In the above example, people very readily "take sides" based upon current perceptions of the issues, past issues and relationships, roles within the organization, and other factors. The parties involved can become an elusive concept to define.

Perceived threat - People respond to the perceived threat, rather than the true threat, facing them. Thus, while perception doesn't become reality per se, people's behaviors, feelings and ongoing responses become modified by that evolving sense of the threat they confront. If we can work to understand the true threat (issues) and develop strategies (solutions) that manage it (agreement), we are acting constructively to manage the conflict.

Needs, interests or concerns - There is a tendency to narrowly define "the problem" as one of substance, task, and near-term viability. However, workplace conflicts tend to be far more complex than that, for they involve ongoing relationships with complex, emotional components. Simply stated, there are always procedural needs and psychological needs to be addressed within the conflict, in addition to the substantive needs that are generally presented. And the durability of the interests and concerns of the parties transcends the immediate presenting situation. Any efforts to resolve conflicts effectively must take these points into account.

So, is it still a simple definition of conflict? We think so, but we must respect that within its elegant simplicity lies a complex set of issues to address. Therefore, it is not surprising that satisfactory resolution of most conflicts can prove so challenging and time consuming to address.

Conflicts occur when people (or other parties) perceive that, as a consequence of a disagreement, there is **a threat to their needs, interests or concerns**. Although conflict is a normal part of organization life, providing numerous opportunities for growth through improved understanding and insight, there is a tendency to view conflict as a negative experience caused by abnormally difficult circumstances. Disputants tend to perceive limited options and finite resources available in seeking solutions, rather than multiple possibilities that may exist 'outside the box' in which we are problem-solving.

A few points are worth reiterating before proceeding:

- A conflict is more than a mere disagreement - it is a situation in which people **perceive a threat** (physical, emotional, power, status, etc.) to their well-being. As such, it is a meaningful experience in people's lives, not to be shrugged off by a mere, "it will pass..."
- Participants in conflicts tend to **respond on the basis of their perceptions of the situation**, rather than an objective review of it. As such, people filter their perceptions (and reactions) through their values,

culture, beliefs, information, experience, gender, and other variables. Conflict responses are both filled with ideas and feelings that can be very strong and powerful guides to our sense of possible solutions.

- As in any problem, **conflicts contain substantive, procedural, and psychological dimensions** to be negotiated. In order to best understand the threat perceived by those engaged in a conflict, we need to consider all of these dimensions.
- Conflicts are normal experiences within the work environment. They are also, to a large degree, **predictable and expectable situations that naturally arise** as we go about managing complex and stressful projects in which we are significantly invested. As such, if we develop procedures for identifying conflicts likely to arise, as well as systems through which we can constructively manage conflicts, we may be able to discover new opportunities to transform conflict into a productive learning experience.
- **Creative problem-solving strategies are essential** to positive approaches to conflict management. We need to transform the situation from one in which it is 'my way or the highway' into one in which we entertain new possibilities that have been otherwise elusive.

Conflict is Normal: Anticipating Conflicts Likely to Arise in the Workplace

Consider your own work environment for a moment:

- What are some key sources of conflict in our workplace?
- When do they tend to occur?
- How do people respond to these conflicts as they arise?
- When we solve problems, do we do so for the moment, or do we put in place systems for addressing these types of concerns in the future?

In reflecting upon your answers to these questions, you may begin to understand what we mean by anticipating conflicts likely to arise in the workplace: Normal, healthy organizations will experience their share of conflict, and workplaces experiencing a certain amount of dysfunction will

experience it in greater quantities. Anticipating conflicts is useful in either situation for transforming these situations into opportunities for growth and learning. Consider...

- Are there seasonal peaks in our workload that tend to occur annually?
 - Chart the occurrence of such challenges, and consider whether they can be managed as a normal period of stress and transition. For example, a school had a large population of students who arrived after long bus rides without breakfast, who tended to arrive at school ready to fight. The school identified 10 minutes at the start of the day to give these students a healthy snack, and worked with teachers to pull out students who weren't yet ready for school before they became disruptive. After food and a little counseling, students entered their classrooms in a better frame of mind (and body) to participate.
- Do we have channels for expressing normal problems and concerns in a predictable, reliable manner?
 - Staff meeting should be used as a tool for effective problem-solving in a range of situations, including anticipated conflicts. If such channels are perceived by staff as closed, unsafe, and non-productive, they will be replaced by gossip, 'end runs' and back-biting.
- Are there certain factors in the environment that make problems worse, especially at times of conflict?
 - Take stock of your processes for managing during stressful times. Look at how phones are routed, noise is managed, client lines are queued, distractions are managed, etc. Often, our response during times of stress is to meet less frequently, because 'we have no time to meet.' And we continue to do things the way we've been doing them, because 'we have no time to create new procedures.' This approach dooms us to repeat the same errors, rather than to learn from the opportunities. Examine

your systems for managing problems, including dispute resolution systems, and use times of "harmony" to identify process improvements that can be implemented in times of stress.

Conflict Styles and Their Consequences

Conflict is often best understood by examining the consequences of various behaviors at moments in time. These behaviors are usefully categorized according to conflict styles. Each style is a way to meet one's needs in a dispute but may impact other people in different ways.

- **Competing** is a style in which one's own needs are advocated over the needs of others. It relies on an aggressive style of communication, low regard for future relationships, and the exercise of coercive power. Those using a competitive style tend to seek control over a discussion, in both substance and ground rules. They fear that loss of such control will result in solutions that fail to meet their needs. Competing tends to result in responses that increase the level of threat.
- **Accommodating**, also known as smoothing, is the opposite of competing. Persons using this style yield their needs to those of others, trying to be diplomatic. They tend to allow the needs of the group to overwhelm their own, which may not ever be stated, as preserving the relationship is seen as most important.
- **Avoiding** is a common response to the negative perception of conflict. "Perhaps if we don't bring it up, it will blow over," we say to ourselves. But, generally, all that happens is that feelings get pent up, views go unexpressed, and the conflict festers until it becomes too big to ignore. Like a cancer that may well have been cured if treated early, the conflict grows and spreads until it kills the relationship. Because needs and concerns go unexpressed, people are often confused, wondering what went wrong in a relationship.
- **Compromising** is an approach to conflict in which people gain and give in a series of tradeoffs. While satisfactory, compromise is generally not satisfying. We each remain shaped by our individual perceptions of our

needs and don't necessarily understand the other side very well. We often retain a lack of trust and avoid risk-taking involved in more collaborative behaviors.

- **Collaborating** is the pooling of individual needs and goals toward a common goal. Often called "win-win problem-solving," collaboration requires assertive communication and cooperation in order to achieve a better solution than either individual could have achieved alone. It offers the chance for consensus, the integration of needs, and the potential to exceed the "budget of possibilities" that previously limited our views of the conflict. It brings new time, energy, and ideas to resolve the dispute meaningfully

By understanding each style and its consequences, we may normalize the results of our behaviors in various situations. This is not to say, "Thou shalt collaborate" in a moralizing way, but to indicate the expected consequences of each approach: If we use a competing style, we might force the others to accept 'our' solution, but this acceptance may be accompanied by fear and resentment. If we accommodate, the relationship may proceed smoothly, but we may build up frustrations that our needs are going unmet. If we compromise, we may feel OK about the outcome, but still harbor resentments in the future. If we collaborate, we may not gain a better solution than a compromise might have yielded, but we are more likely to feel better about our chances for future understanding and goodwill. And if we avoid discussing the conflict at all, both parties may remain clueless about the real underlying issues and concerns, only to be dealing with them in the future. If you'd like further insights into the conflict styles you tend to use take the [Situational Conflict Styles Assessment Exercise](#) on this site. If you have further questions [contact us!](#)

How we Respond to Conflict: Thoughts, Feelings, and Physical Responses¹

In addition to the behavioral responses summarized by the various conflict styles, we have emotional, cognitive and physical responses to conflict. These are important windows into our experience during conflict, for they frequently

tell us more about what is the true source of threat that we perceive; by understanding our thoughts, feelings and physical responses to conflict, we may get better insights into the best potential solutions to the situation.

- **Emotional responses:** These are the feelings we experience in conflict, ranging from anger and fear to despair and confusion. Emotional responses are often misunderstood, as people tend to believe that others feel the same as they do. Thus, differing emotional responses are confusing and, at times, threatening.
- **Cognitive responses:** These are our ideas and thoughts about a conflict, often present as inner voices or internal observers in the midst of a situation. Through sub-vocalization (i.e., self-talk), we come to understand these cognitive responses. For example, we might think any of the following things in response to another person taking a parking spot just as we are ready to park:

"That jerk! Who does he think he is! What a sense of entitlement!"

or:

"I wonder if he realizes what he has done. He seems lost in his own thoughts. I hope he is okay."

or:

"What am I supposed to do? Now I'm going to be late for my meeting... Should I say something to him? What if he gets mad at me?"

Such differing cognitive responses contribute to emotional and behavioral responses, where self-talk can either promote a positive or negative feedback loop in the situation.

- **Physical responses:** These responses can play an important role in our ability to meet our needs in the conflict. They include heightened stress, bodily tension, increased perspiration, tunnel vision, shallow or accelerated breathing, nausea, and rapid heartbeat. These responses are similar to those we experience in high-anxiety situations, and they

may be managed through [stress management](#) techniques. Establishing a calmer environment in which emotions can be managed is more likely if the physical response is addressed effectively.

¹ Adapted from Harry Webne-Behrman, **The Practice of Facilitation: Managing Group Process and Solving Problems**, Quorum Books, Greenwood Publishing, 1998, by permission of the author. All rights reserved.

The Role of Perceptions in Conflict

As noted in our basic definition of conflict, we define conflict as **a disagreement through which the parties involved perceive a threat to their needs, interests or concerns**. One key element of this definition is the idea that each party may have a different perception of any given situation. We can anticipate having such differences due to a number of factors that create "perceptual filters" that influence our responses to the situation:

- **Culture, race, and ethnicity:**² Our varying cultural backgrounds influence us to hold certain beliefs about the social structure of our world, as well as the role of conflict in that experience. We may have learned to value substantive, procedural and psychological needs differently as a result, thus influencing our willingness to engage in various modes of negotiation and efforts to manage the conflict
- **Gender and sexuality:**³ Men and women often perceive situations somewhat differently, based on both their experiences in the world (which relates to power and privilege, as do race and ethnicity) and socialization patterns that reinforce the importance of relationships vs. task, substance vs. process, immediacy vs. long-term outcomes. As a result, men and women will often approach conflictive situations with differing mindsets about the desired outcomes from the situation, as well as the set of possible solutions that may exist.
- **Knowledge (general and situational):** Parties respond to given conflicts on the basis of the knowledge they may have about the issue at hand. This includes situation-specific knowledge (i.e., "Do I understand what is going on here?") and general knowledge (i.e., "Have

I experienced this type of situation before?" or "Have I studied about similar situations before?"). Such information can influence the person's willingness to engage in efforts to manage the conflict, either reinforcing confidence to deal with the dilemma or undermining one's willingness to flexibly consider alternatives.

- **Impressions of the Messenger:** If the person sharing the message - the messenger - is perceived to be a threat (powerful, scary, unknown, etc.), this can influence our responses to the overall situation being experienced. For example, if a big scary-looking guy is approaching me rapidly, yelling "Get out of the way!" I may respond differently than if a diminutive, calm person would express the same message to me. As well, if I knew either one of them previously, I might respond differently based upon that prior sense of their credibility: I am more inclined to listen with respect to someone I view as credible than if the message comes from someone who lacks credibility and integrity in my mind.
- **Previous experiences:** Some of us have had profound, significant life experiences that continue to influence our perceptions of current situations. These experiences may have left us fearful, lacking trust, and reluctant to take risks. On the other hand, previous experiences may have left us confident, willing to take chances and experience the unknown. Either way, we must acknowledge the role of previous experiences as elements of our perceptual filter in the current dilemma.

These factors (along with others) conspire to form the perceptual filters through which we experience conflict. As a result, our reactions to the threat and dilemma posed by conflict should be anticipated to include varying understandings of the situation. This also means that we can anticipate that in many conflicts there will be significant misunderstanding of each other's perceptions, needs and feelings. These challenges contribute to our emerging sense, during conflict, that the situation is overwhelming and unsolvable. As such, they become critical sources of potential understanding, insight and

² Much more can be said about this subject. We have posted an article as an additional

resource: "[Managing Intercultural Conflicts Effectively](#)," by Stella Ting-Toomey, 1994.

³ This topic is well addressed in the writings of Professor Deborah Tannen, who has focused extensively on gender differences in communication.

Why do we tend to avoid dealing with conflict?

Engaging in dialogue and negotiation around conflict is something we tend to approach with fear and hesitation, afraid that the conversation will go worse than the conflict has gone thus far. All too often, we talk ourselves out of potential dialogue:

"Why should I talk to her? She'll bite my head off and not listen to anything I have to say!"

OR

"I should talk to him about this problem, but maybe it will go away on its own. There's no sense stirring up something that makes us both uncomfortable."

OR

"If I go to him, I'm making myself vulnerable. No, that's his responsibility - he should come to me and ask me to talk!"

Our responses, as noted earlier, tend to include behaviors, feelings, thoughts and physical responses. If any of these responses indicates stress factors that make us reluctant to talk things out, we are more inclined to follow the pathway of avoidance. In addition, if we have history with the individuals involved in this conflict (i.e., we've tried to negotiate with them in the past, without success), it will "filter" our perceptions of this situation and make us reluctant to negotiate.

In addition, consider that **our society tends to reward alternative responses** to conflict, rather than negotiation: People who aggressively pursue their needs, competing rather than collaborating, are often satisfied by others who prefer to accommodate. Managers and leaders are often rewarded for their aggressive, controlling approaches to problems, rather than taking a more

compassionate approach to issues that may seem less decisive to the public or their staffs. In other circumstances, those who raise issues and concerns, even respectfully, are quickly perceived to be "problem" clients or staff members... they tend to be avoided and minimized. In any of these approaches, negotiated solutions to conflicts are rarely modeled or held in high esteem.

Finally, we should keep in mind that **negotiation requires profound courage** on the part of all parties: It takes courage to honestly and clearly articulate your needs, and it takes courage to sit down and listen to your adversaries. It takes courage to look at your own role in the dispute, and it takes courage to approach others with a sense of empathy, openness and respect for their perspective. Collaborative approaches to conflict management require us to engage in the moment of dialogue in profound and meaningful ways, so it is understandable if we tend to avoid such situations until the balance of wisdom tips in favor of negotiation.

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

Introduction

Webster's Dictionary defines conflict as "a battle, contest of opposing forces, discord, antagonism existing between primitive desires, instincts and moral, religious, or ethical ideals." Conflict occurs when two or more people or organizations disagree because their needs, wants, goals, or values are different. Hurt feelings, anger, bruised egos, and poor communication are all the precursors to conflict. However, conflict is NOT the end of the world, or your team or group. Some tools have been developed that will help us all recognize conflict and deal with it so that our group or team can move on, stronger than before.

Lesson Objectives

By the end of the lesson a learner should be able to:

1. Discuss red flags of conflict
2. Talk about why conflict can be both positive and negative
3. Discuss conflict management styles

4. Talk about the ways that individuals analyze conflict
5. Discuss ways that an individual can positive deal with difficult people while managing conflict.

Lesson Content

Most all of us have been in a conflict at some point in our lives. But did we know that conflict was coming? Could we have seen it, and “headed it off at the pass”? The National School Board Association has developed a Toolkit for Educational Leadership (<http://www.nsba.org/sbot/toolkit/Conflict.html>) that talks about conflict and what might be some “red flags” to look out for.

Red Flags of Conflict

- Body language
- Disagreements, regardless of issue
- Withholding bad news
- Surprises
- Strong public statements
- Airing disagreements through media
- Conflicts in value systems
- Desire for power
- Increasing lack of support
- Open disagreement
- Lack of candor on budget problems or other sensitive issues
- Lack of clear goals
- No discussion of progress, failed goals, and inability to evaluate leaders fairly, thoroughly, or at all. Many people think of conflict as negative. But conflict can be both negative AND positive. The National School Board Association in their Toolkit for Educational Leadership (<http://www.nsba.org/sbot/toolkit/Conflict.html>) tells us that . . . Conflict is negative when it...
 - Takes attention away from other activities
 - Damages the spirit of the team or an individual
 - Divides people and groups, and makes cooperation difficult
 - Makes people or group focus on their differences
 - Leads to harmful behavior, like fighting or name-calling But it can be positive or constructive when it...
 - Clears up important problems or issues

- Brings about solutions to problems
- Gets everyone involved in solving issues
- Causes real communication
- Release emotion, anxiety, and stress in a positive way
- Helps people learn more about each other and cooperate
- Develops understanding and skills

While the definition of conflict and our feelings about it tend to be negative, conflict itself does not need to be negative! How we manage our conflict can sway the outcome, our feelings about the way it was handled, and the people involved conflict.

What is CONFLICT MANAGEMENT?

Conflict management is what we're doing when we identify and deal with conflict in a reasonable manner. To manage conflict the United States Department of Agriculture (<http://www.usda.gov/cprc/understand.htm>) says we must develop and use skills like effective communication, problem solving, and negotiating. When we resolve issues, we need to focus on the things we need or desire as a group, and not things needed or wanted by individuals. This promotes working with each other instead of against each other. There are some proven strategies that you can use to help resolve conflicts within your groups. The Ohio Commission on Dispute Resolution and Conflict Management

<http://disputeresolution.ohio.gov/schools/contentpages/styles.htm>)

describes five popular styles.

• Style 1- Collaborating

o **Why should I collaborate?:** Cooperation will help everyone achieve their goals and keep relationships healthy.

o **A Collaborator's Attitude:** Talking through the conflict will help us find creative ways to solve our problems where everyone is satisfied in the end.

o **When should I collaborate?:**

- Everyone trust each other
- No one wants total decision or resolution power
- Everyone needs to have a part in the decision
- Everyone involved will change their thinking as more information is available
- People need to work through personal hurts and disappointments

o **When should I choose another method?:**

- When you need a resolution that won't take a lot of time and money

- When some may take advantage of others' trust

- **STYLE 2-COMPROMISING**

- o **Why should I compromise?:** Winning something while losing a little is sometimes okay.

- o **A Compromiser's Attitude:** We should all meet halfway to do what is best for the group and each of us can still get part of what we want.

- o **When should I compromise?:**

- No one at the table has more position or power than anyone else and everyone is equally committed to the group's goals.
- Time can be saved by agreeing on a situation that works for everyone "for now"
- Achieving all of your goals are only somewhat important

- o **When should I choose another method?:**

- Things that are important to you may be lost in the fray
- Someone's demands are too great for the rest of the table

- **STYLE 3-ACCOMODATING**

- o **Why should I accommodate?:** Our commonalities are more important than other issues and facing differences may hurt relationships.

- o **An accommodator's attitude:** I will please others by playing down how important the issue or conflict is in order to protect relationships.

- o **When should I accommodate?:**

- Issues not as important to you as it is to others
- You know you can't win
- Everyone agreeing is the most important thing
- The things people have in common are more important than their differences

- o **When should I choose another method?:**

- Some ideas don't get attention
- Credibility and influence can be lost

- **STYLE 4-COMPETING**

- o **Why should I compete?:** Resolving a conflict is associated with competition and winning.

- o **A competitor's attitude:** I must use all of my power to win the conflict.

- o **When should I compete?:**

- You know you're right
- A quick decision is necessary

- Strong personalities are overshadowing other people
- Defending your rights or position
- o **When should I choose another method?:**
- Can make conflict worse
- Those on the losing end may attempt to get back at the winners

- **STYLE 5-AVOIDING**

- o **Why should I avoid?:** Not the right time or place to address this issue.
- o **An avoider's attitude:** I avoid conflict by leaving, avoid, or putting off discussions.

- o **When should I avoid?:**

- Conflict is small and the future of a relationships is at stake
- There is no time to devote to conflict resolution
- Other issues are more important than the conflict
- There is no chance of getting your concerns heard
- One party is too emotionally involved and others can better resolve the conflict
- More information is needed

- o **When should I choose another method?:**

- Decisions may be made by default
- Putting off or avoiding issues may make matters worse

Dealing with People While Managing Conflict

Some people aren't willing to admit that they may not be the best at conflict management, but that doesn't mean that they aren't sometimes involved in the management process. You can't change the way that people behave or approach conflict, but you can arm yourself with some tools to help you successfully navigate conflict when not everyone is on the same page. Don Wallace and Scott McMurry talk about some of those tools using Robert Bramson's book *Coping with Difficult People* in an article titled *How to Disagree without Being Disagreeable* in the November 1995 issue of *Fast Company Magazine* (<http://pf.fastcompany.com/online/01/disagree.html>).

- **Sherman Tanks-** These intimidators get "in your face" to argue and state opinions as facts.

1. Get their attention by using their first name to begin a sentence.
2. Maintain eye contact; give them time to wind down.
3. Stand up to them without fighting; don't worry about being polite.

4. Suggest you sit down to continue discussions.

- **Snipers-** These individuals take potshots in meetings but avoid one-on-one confrontations.

1. Expose the attack; draw them out in public and don't let social convention stop you.

2. Get other opinions--don't give in to the sniper's views.

3. Provide the sniper with alternatives to a direct contest.

- **Chronic Complainers-** These people find faults with everyone-except themselves.

1. Politely interrupt and get control of the situation.

2. Quickly sum up the facts.

3. Ask for their complaints in writing.

- **Negativists-** These individuals know that nothing new will work; they'll disrupt group brainstorming sessions.

1. Acknowledge their valid points.

2. Describe past successes.

3. Avoid "you're wrong, I'm right" arguments.

- **Exploders-** These individuals throw tantrums that quickly escalate.

1. Give them time to regain self control.

2. If they don't, shout a neutral phrase such as "STOP!"

3. Take a time-out or have a private meeting with them.

Steps to Analyzing Conflict

How can you manage conflict and disagreements in ways that strengthen instead of damage personal and professional relationships? These five steps from the Watershed information Network at Purdue University (<http://www.ctic.purdue.edu/KYW/Brochures/ManageConflict.html>) could help you out...

- **STEP 1: ANALYZE THE CONFLICT**

Don't be afraid to ask questions of everyone involved. Take in answers from a variety of sources, and gain as much information as you can.

- **STEP 2: DETERMINE YOUR MANAGEMENT STRATEGY**

When you understand the basis of the conflict and everyone involved, you will need to develop a plan to manage the conflict. There are many plans to choose from, so you can pick the one that is most appropriate for your situation.

- **STEP 3: PRE-NEGOTIATION**

Steps must be taken for discussion to begin. This to think about include:

- Someone has to start the conversation! If neither party is willing to do so, bring in an outsider who will remain neutral to begin discussions.
- Everyone must be ready to come to the table, to work together, and resolve the issues.
- The group must agree on rules for the discussion. Some ideas of things to include are: ways we'll communicate and how we'll make the final decision.
- BE ORGANIZED! Location, time, place and materials must all be in order for conflict management to work.
- Everyone at the table must agree on what information is put on the table, relevant to the conflict, and how the group will get answers to questions.

• **STEP 4: NEGOTIATION**

Negotiations should be discussions that include:

- Reasons, needs, concerns and motivations for differing positions
- Current options
- Evaluation of all the current options
- Written agreement that documents what everyone understands
- Everyone must be confident that all parties will follow through with their parts of the agreement. Make sure everyone is on the same page and understands the expectations.

• **STEP 5: POST-NEGOTIATION**

Once negotiation is complete, the group should take the actions they decided upon.

- Individuals should get support from outside parties who may have been involved in some way. Outsiders must be on board with the terms of the agreements reached during Step 4.
- Communication and working together should continue throughout this process.

Reflection

- Identify a time when you've been in a conflict. How did you behave? Did you escalate or deescalate the situation? If you could replay the situation, what would you do differently?
- Identify times when you have behaved like one of the "conflict problem people" listed in the brochure. How can we keep ourselves in check so that we don't repeat past mistakes?

□ How can you implement the strategies contained in this lesson in your club or group?

Resources

National School Board Association. Toolkit for Educational Leadership. Retrieved electronically from <http://www.nsba.org/sbot/toolkit/Conflict.html> on October 5, 2003.

Ohio Commission on Dispute Resolution and Conflict Management. Choosing a Conflict Management Style. Retrieved electronically from <http://disputeresolution.ohio.gov/schools/contentpages/styles.htm> on October 5, 2003.

United States Department of Agriculture. Understanding conflict management and ADR. Retrieved electronically from <http://www.usda.gov/cprc/understand.htm> on October 5, 2003. Wallace, D. & McMurry S. (1995) How to Disagree without Being Disagreeable . Fast Company Magazine . Retrieved electronically from <http://pf.fastcompany.com/online/01/disagree.html> on October 5, 2003

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Conflict Management Techniques

Conflict situations are an important aspect of the workplace. A conflict is a situation when the interests, needs, goals or values of involved parties interfere with one another. A conflict is a common phenomenon in the workplace. Different stakeholders may have different priorities; conflicts may involve team members, departments, projects, organization and client, boss and subordinate, organization needs vs. personal needs. Often, a conflict is a result of perception. Is conflict a bad thing? Not necessarily. Often, a conflict presents opportunities for improvement. Therefore, it is important to understand (and apply) various conflict resolution techniques.

Forcing

Also known as *competing*. An individual firmly pursues his or her own concerns despite the resistance of the other person. This may involve pushing one viewpoint at the expense of another or maintaining firm resistance to another person's actions.

Examples of when *forcing* may be appropriate

- In certain situations when all other, less forceful methods, don't work or are ineffective
- When you need to stand up for your own rights, resist aggression and pressure
- When a quick resolution is required and using force is justified (e.g. in a life-

- threatening situation, to stop an aggression)
- As a last resort to resolve a long-lasting conflict

Possible advantages of *forcing*:

- May provide a quick resolution to a conflict
- Increases self-esteem and draws respect when firm resistance or actions were a response to an aggression or hostility

Some caveats of *forcing*:

- May negatively affect your relationship with the opponent in the long run
- May cause the opponent to react in the same way, even if the opponent did not intend to be forceful originally
- Cannot take advantage of the strong sides of the other side's position
- Taking this approach may require a lot of energy and be exhausting to some individuals

Win-Win (Collaborating)

Also known as *problem confronting* or *problem solving*. Collaboration involves an attempt to work with the other person to find a win-win solution to the problem in hand - the one that most satisfies the concerns of both parties. The win-win approach sees conflict resolution as an opportunity to come to a mutually beneficial result. It includes identifying the underlying concerns of the opponents and finding an alternative which meets each party's concerns.

Examples of when *collaborating* may be appropriate:

- When consensus and commitment of other parties is important
- In a collaborative environment
- When it is required to address the interests of multiple stakeholders
- When a high level of trust is present
- When a long-term relationship is important
- When you need to work through hard feelings, animosity, etc
- When you don't want to have full responsibility

Possible advantages of *collaborating*:

- Leads to solving the actual problem
- Leads to a win-win outcome
- Reinforces mutual trust and respect
- Builds a foundation for effective collaboration in the future
- Shared responsibility of the outcome
- You earn the reputation of a good negotiator
- For parties involved, the outcome of the conflict resolution is less stressful (however, the process of finding and establishing a win-win solution may be very involved – see the caveats below)

Some caveats of *collaborating*:

- Requires a commitment from all parties to look for a mutually acceptable solution
- May require more effort and more time than some other methods. A win-win solution may not be evident
- For the same reason, collaborating may not be practical when timing is crucial and a quick solution or fast response is required
- Once one or more parties lose their trust in an opponent, the relationship falls back to other methods of conflict resolution. Therefore, all involved parties must continue collaborative efforts to maintain a collaborative relationship

Compromising

Compromising looks for an expedient and mutually acceptable solution which partially satisfies both parties.

Examples of when *compromise* may be appropriate:

- When the goals are moderately important and not worth the use of more assertive or more involving approaches, such as forcing or collaborating
- To reach temporary settlement on complex issues
- To reach expedient solutions on important issues
- As a first step when the involved parties do not know each other well or haven't yet developed a high level of mutual trust
- When collaboration or forcing do not work

Possible advantages of *compromise*:

- Faster issue resolution. Compromising may be more practical when time is a factor
- Can provide a temporary solution while still looking for a win-win solution
- Lowers the levels of tension and stress resulting from the conflict

Some caveats of using *compromise*:

- May result in a situation when both parties are not satisfied with the outcome (a lose-lose situation)
- Does not contribute to building trust in the long run
- May require close monitoring and control to ensure the agreements are met

Withdrawing

Also known as *avoiding*. This is when a person does not pursue her/his own concerns or those of the opponent. He/she does not address the conflict, sidesteps, postpones or simply withdraws.

Examples of when *withdrawing* may be appropriate:

- When the issue is trivial and not worth the effort
- When more important issues are pressing, and you don't have time to deal with it
- In situations where postponing the response is beneficial to you, for example -
 - When it is not the right time or place to confront the issue
 - When you need time to think and collect information before you act (e.g. if you are unprepared or taken by surprise)
- When you see no chance of getting your concerns met or you would have to put forth unreasonable efforts
- When you would have to deal with hostility
- When you are unable to handle the conflict (e.g. if you are too emotionally involved or others can handle it better)

Possible advantages of *withdrawing*:

- When the opponent is forcing / attempts aggression, you may choose to withdraw and postpone your response until you are in a more favourable circumstance for you to push back
- Withdrawing is a low stress approach when the conflict is short
- Gives the ability/time to focus on more important or more urgent issues instead
- Gives you time to better prepare and collect information before you act

Some caveats of *withdrawing*:

- May lead to weakening or losing your position; not acting may be interpreted as an agreement. Using withdrawing strategies without negatively affecting your own position requires certain skill and experience
- When multiple parties are involved, withdrawing may negatively affect your relationship with a party that expects your action

Smoothing

Also known as *accommodating*. Smoothing is accommodating the concerns of other people first of all, rather than one's own concerns.

Examples of when *smoothing* may be appropriate:

- When it is important to provide a temporary relief from the conflict or buy time until you are in a better position to respond/push back
- When the issue is not as important to you as it is to the other person
- When you accept that you are wrong
- When you have no choice or when continued competition would be detrimental

Possible advantages of *smoothing*:

- In some cases smoothing will help to protect more important interests while giving up on some less important ones

- Gives an opportunity to reassess the situation from a different angle

Some caveats of *smoothing*:

- There is a risk to be abused, i.e. the opponent may constantly try to take advantage of your tendency toward smoothing/accommodating. Therefore it is important to keep the right balance and this requires some skill.
- May negatively affect your confidence in your ability to respond to an aggressive opponent
- It makes it more difficult to transition to a win-win solution in the future
- Some of your supporters may not like your smoothing response and be turned off

How to Deal With Conflict

CLARIFYING CONFUSION ABOUT CONFLICT

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Conflict occurs with two or more people who, despite their first attempts at agreement, do not yet have agreement on a course of action, usually because their values, perspectives and opinions are contradictory in nature. Conflict can occur:

1. Within yourself when you are not living according to your values.
2. When your values and perspectives are threatened.
3. When there is discomfort from fear of the unknown or from lack of fulfillment.

Conflict is inevitable and often necessary when forming high-performing teams because they evolve through “form, storm, norm and perform” periods. Getting the most out of diversity often means addressing contradictory values, perspectives and opinions. Conflict is often needed. It:

- Helps to raise and address problems.
- Energizes work to be focused on the most important priorities.
- Helps people “be real” and motivates them to fully participate.
- Helps people learn how to recognize and benefit from their differences.

Conflict is not the same as discomfort. The conflict is not the problem – poor management of the conflict is the problem. Conflict is a problem when it:

- Hampers productivity.
- Lowers morale.
- Causes more and continued conflicts.
- Causes inappropriate behaviors.

Types of Managerial Actions That Cause Workplace Conflicts

1. Poor communications

- Employees experience continual surprises, for example, they are not informed of major decisions that affect their workplaces and lives.
- Employees do not understand the reasons for the decisions – they are not involved in the decision-making.
- As a result, they trust the “rumor mill” more than their management.

2. The alignment or the amount of resources is insufficient. There is:

- Disagreement about “who does what.”
- Stress from working with inadequate resources.

3. “Personal chemistry,” including conflicting values or actions, for example:

- Strong interpersonal natures among workers do not seem to match.
- We do not like others because they seem too much like ourselves (we often do not like in others what we do not like in ourselves).

4. Leadership problems

For example, inconsistent, missing, too-strong or uninformed leadership (at any level in the organization), evidenced by:

- Avoiding conflict, “passing the buck” with little follow-through on decisions.
- Employees see the same continued issues in the workplace.
- Supervisors do not understand the jobs of their subordinates.

Key Managerial Actions / Structures to Minimize Conflicts

1. Regularly review job descriptions. Get your employee’s input to them. Ensure:

- Job roles do not conflict.
- No tasks “fall in a crack.”

2. Intentionally build relationships with all subordinates.

- Meet at least once a month alone with them in office.
- Ask about accomplishments, challenges and issues.

3. Get regular, written status reports that describe:

- Accomplishments.
- Currents issues and needs from management.

- Plans for the upcoming period.

4. Conduct basic training about:

- Interpersonal communications.
- Conflict management.
- Delegation.

5. Develop procedures for routine tasks and include the employees' input.

- Have employees write procedures when possible and appropriate.
- Get employees' review of the procedures.
- Distribute the procedures.
- Train employees about the procedures.

6. Regularly hold management meetings with all employees.

For example, every month, communicate new initiatives and status of current products or services.

7. Consider an anonymous suggestion box in which employees can provide suggestions.

This can be powerful means to collect honest feedback, especially in very conflicted workplaces.

Ways People Deal With Conflict

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There is no one best way to deal with conflict. It depends on the current situation. Here are the major ways that people use to deal with conflict:

1. You can avoid it.

Pretend it is not there or ignore it. Use this approach only when it simply is not worth the effort to argue. Be aware that this approach tends to worsen the conflict over time.

2. You can accommodate it.

You can give in to others, sometimes to the extent that you compromise yourself. Use this approach very sparingly and infrequently, for example, in situations when you know that you will have another more useful approach in the very near future. Usually this approach tends to worsen the conflict over time, and causes conflicts within yourself.

3. You can compete with the others.

You can work to get your way, rather than clarifying and addressing the issue. Competitors love accommodators. Use this approach when you have a very strong conviction about your position.

4. Compromising.

You can engage in mutual give-and-take. This approach is used when the goal is to get past the issue and move on together.

5. Collaborating.

You can focus on working together. Use this approach when the goal is to meet as many current needs as possible by using mutual resources. This approach sometimes raises new mutual needs. Collaboration can also be used when the goal is to cultivate ownership and commitment.

To Manage a Conflict with Another Person

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1. Know what you do not like about yourself, early on in your career.

- We often do not like in others what we do not want to see in ourselves.
- Write down 5 traits that really bug you when see them in others.
- Be aware that these traits are your “hot buttons.”

2. Manage yourself. If you and/or another person are getting upset, then manage yourself to stay calm:

- Speak to the person as if the other person is not upset – this can be very effective!
- Avoid use of the word “you” – this avoids your appearing to be blaming the person.
- Nod your head to assure the person that you heard him/her.
- Maintain eye contact with the person.

3. Move the discussion to a private area, if possible.

- Many times, moving to a new environment invites both of you to see or feel differently.

4. Give the other person time to vent.

- Do not interrupt the person or judge what he/she is saying.

5. Verify that you are accurately hearing each other. When the other person is done speaking:

- Ask the person to let you rephrase (uninterrupted) what you are hearing to ensure you are hearing it correctly.
- To understand the person more, ask open-ended questions (avoid “why” questions – those questions often make people feel defensive).

6. Repeat the above step, for the other to verify that he/she is hearing you. Describe your perspective:

- Use “I”, not “you.”
- Talk in terms of the present as much as possible.
- Quickly mention your feelings.

7. Acknowledge where you disagree and where you agree.

- One of the most powerful means to resolve conflict is to mention where you both agree.

8. Discuss the matter on which you disagree, not the nature of the other person.

- Ask “What can we do fix the problem?” The person might begin to complain again.
- Then ask the same question. Focus on actions you both can do.
- Ask the other person if they will support the action(s).
- If the person will not, then ask for a “cooling off period”.

9. Thank the person for working with you.

- It takes patience for a person to engage in meaningful conversation during conflict. Acknowledge and thank the other person for his/her effort.

10. If the situation remains a conflict, then:

- Conclude if the other person’s behavior violates one of the personnel policies and procedures in the workplace and if it does, then follow the policy’s terms for addressing that violation.
- Otherwise, consider whether to agree to disagree.
- Consider seeking a third party to mediate.