

Conflict Resolution

Conflict, or more specifically, interpersonal conflict, is a fact of life, and particularly of organizational life. It often emerges more when people are stressed, for example, when there are changes on the horizon, or when everyone is under pressure because of a looming deadline.

However, conflict can also arise in relationships and situations outside work.

Handling conflict in ways that lead to increased stress can be detrimental to your health. Poor conflict management can lead to higher production of the stress hormone cortisol, and also cause hardening of the arteries, leading to increased risk of heart attacks, and high blood pressure.

Learning to deal with conflict in a positive and constructive way, without excessive stress, is therefore an important way to improve your well-being as well as your relationships.

What is Conflict?

Interpersonal conflict has been defined as:

“An expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from the other party in achieving their goals.”

Unpacking this a little, it means that for a disagreement to become a conflict, there needs to be:

- Some element of communication: a shared understanding that there is a disagreement;
- The well-being of the people involved need to depend on each other in some way. This doesn't mean that they have to have equal power: a manager and subordinate can be equally as interdependent as a married couple;
- The people involved perceive that their goals are incompatible, meaning that they cannot both be met;
- They are competing for resources; and
- Each perceives the other as interfering with the achievement of their goals.

Conflict is not always a bad thing.

Conflict can be destructive, leading people to develop negative feelings for each other and spend energy on conflict that could be better spent elsewhere. It can also deepen differences, and lead groups to polarize into either/or positions.

However, well-managed conflict can also be constructive, helping to 'clear the air', releasing emotion and stress, and resolving tension, especially if those involved use it as an opportunity to increase understanding and find a way forward together out of the conflict situation.

Types of Conflict

There are three types of conflict: *personal or relational conflicts*, *instrumental conflicts*, and *conflicts of interest*:

- **Personal or relational conflicts** are usually about identity or self-image, or important aspects of a relationship such as loyalty, breach of confidence, perceived betrayal, or lack of respect.
- **Instrumental conflicts** are about goals, structures, procedures, and means: something fairly tangible and structural within the organization or for an individual.
- **Conflicts of interest** concern the ways in which the means of achieving goals are distributed, such as time, money, space, and staff. They may also be about factors related to these, such as relative importance, or knowledge and expertise. An example would be a couple disagreeing over whether to spend a bonus on a holiday or to repair the roof.

Before you can resolve a conflict, or even decide on a strategy for resolving it, you need to identify its source and therefore its type.

Resolving Conflict

It's important to emphasize that dealing with conflict early is usually easier, because positions are not so entrenched, others are less likely to have started to take sides, and the negative emotions are not so extreme. The best way to address a conflict in its early stages is through **negotiation** between the participants. See our pages on [Negotiation Skills](#) for more information.

Later on, those in conflict are likely to need the support of **mediation**, or even arbitration or a court judgement, so it's much better to resolve things early.

There are **five main strategies** for dealing with conflicts, all of which can be considered in terms of who wins and who loses. As our page [Transactional Analysis](#) makes clear, a win-win situation is always going to be better for everyone.

These strategies are:

1) Competition or Fighting

This is the classic win/lose situation, where the strength and power of one person wins the conflict. It has its place, but anyone using it needs to be aware that it will create a loser and if that loser has no outlet for expressing their concerns, then it will lead to bad feeling.

2) Collaboration

This is the ideal outcome: a win/win situation. However, it requires input of time from those involved to work through the difficulties, and find a way to solve the problem that is agreeable to all.

3) Compromise or Negotiation

This is likely to result in a better result than win/lose, but it's not quite win/win. Both parties give up something, in favour of an agreed mid-point solution. It takes less time than collaboration, but is likely to result in less commitment to the outcome.

4) Avoidance or Denial

This is where everyone pretends there is no problem. It's helpful if those in conflict need time to 'cool down' before any discussion or if the conflict is unimportant, but cannot be used if the conflict won't just die down. It will create a lose/lose situation, since there will still be bad feeling, but no clearing the air through discussion, and results, in Transactional Analysis terms, in 'I'm not OK, you're not OK'.

5) Accommodation or Smoothing Over the Problem

On the surface, harmony is maintained, but underneath, there is still conflict. It's similar to the situation above, except that one person is probably OK with this smoothing, while the other remains in conflict, creating a win/lose situation again. It can work where preserving a relationship is more important than dealing with the conflict right now, but is not useful if others feel the need to deal with the situation.

These five behaviors can be shown in terms of a balance between concern for self and concern for others.

Finally...

In handling conflict both as a direct participant and as a potential mediator, it is important to know your limitations.

If you reach a point where you don't feel confident that your intervention is going to help, then it's OK to step back and ask for help. Sometimes you might need to involve someone else, such as a trained mediator, and that's fine. It's better to ask for help than to step in and make matters worse.

Source: <http://www.skillsyouneed.com/ips/conflict-resolution.html>

Conflict Resolution: Resolving Conflict Rationally and Effectively

From "Mind Tools" – http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newLDR_81.htm

In many cases, conflict in the workplace just seems to be a fact of life. We've all seen situations where different people with different goals and needs have come into conflict. And we've all seen the often-intense personal animosity that can result.

The fact that conflict exists, however, is not necessarily a bad thing: As long as it is resolved effectively, it can lead to personal and professional growth. In many cases, effective conflict resolution skills can make the difference between positive and negative outcomes.

The good news is that by resolving conflict successfully, you can solve many of the problems that it has brought to the surface, as well as getting benefits that you might not at first expect:

- **Increased understanding:** The discussion needed to resolve conflict expands people's awareness of the situation, giving them an insight into how they can achieve their own goals without undermining those of other people.
- **Increased group cohesion:** When conflict is resolved effectively, team members can develop stronger mutual respect and a renewed faith in their ability to work together.
- **Improved self-knowledge:** Conflict pushes individuals to examine their goals in close detail, helping them understand the things that are most important to them, sharpening their focus, and enhancing their effectiveness.

However, if conflict is not handled effectively, the results can be damaging. Conflicting goals can quickly turn into personal dislike. Teamwork breaks down. Talent is wasted as people disengage from their work. And it's easy to end up in a vicious downward spiral of negativity and recrimination.

If you're to keep your team or organization working effectively, you need to stop this downward spiral as soon as you can. To do this, it helps to understand two of the theories that lie behind effective conflict resolution techniques:

Understanding the Theory: Conflict Styles

In the 1970s Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann identified five main styles of dealing with conflict that vary in their degrees of cooperativeness and assertiveness. They argued that people typically have a preferred conflict resolution style. However they also noted that different styles were most useful in different situations. The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) helps you to identify which style you tend towards when conflict arises.

Thomas and Kilmann's styles are:

Competitive: People who tend towards a competitive style take a firm stand, and know what they want. They usually operate from a position of power, drawn from things like position, rank, expertise, or persuasive ability. This style can be useful when there is an emergency and a decision needs to be made fast; when the decision is unpopular; or when defending against someone who is trying to exploit the situation selfishly. However it can leave people feeling bruised, unsatisfied and resentful when used in less urgent situations.

Collaborative: People tending towards a collaborative style try to meet the needs of all people involved. These people can be highly assertive but unlike the competitor, they cooperate effectively and acknowledge that everyone is important. This style is useful when you need to bring together a variety of viewpoints to get the best solution; when there have been previous conflicts in the group; or when the situation is too important for a simple trade-off.

Compromising: People who prefer a compromising style try to find a solution that will at least partially satisfy everyone. Everyone is expected to give up something and the compromiser him- or herself also expects to relinquish something. Compromise is useful when the cost of conflict is higher than the cost of losing ground, when equal strength opponents are at a standstill and when there is a deadline looming.

Accommodating: This style indicates a willingness to meet the needs of others at the expense of the person's own needs. The accommodator often knows when to give in to others, but can be persuaded to surrender a position even when it is not warranted. This person is not assertive but is highly cooperative. Accommodation is appropriate when the issues matter more to the other party, when peace is more valuable than winning, or when you want to be in a position to collect on this "favor" you gave. However people may not return favors, and overall this approach is unlikely to give the best outcomes.

Avoiding: People tending towards this style seek to evade the conflict entirely. This style is typified by delegating controversial decisions, accepting default decisions, and not wanting to hurt anyone's feelings. It can be appropriate when victory is impossible, when the controversy is trivial, or when someone else is in a better position to solve the problem. However in many situations this is a weak and ineffective approach to take.

Once you understand the different styles, you can use them to think about the most appropriate approach (or mixture of approaches) for the situation you're in. You can also think about your own instinctive approach, and learn how you need to change this if necessary.

Ideally you can adopt an approach that meets the situation, resolves the problem, respects people's legitimate interests, and mends damaged working relationships.

Understanding the Theory: The "Interest-Based Relational Approach"

The second theory is commonly referred to as the "Interest-Based Relational (IBR) Approach". This conflict resolution strategy respects individual differences while helping people avoid becoming too entrenched in a fixed position.

In resolving conflict using this approach, you follow these rules:

- **Make sure that good relationships are the first priority:** As far as possible, make sure that you treat the other calmly and that you try to build mutual respect. Do your best to be courteous to one another and remain constructive under pressure.
- **Keep people and problems separate:** Recognize that in many cases the other person is not just "being difficult" – real and valid differences can lie behind conflictive positions. By separating the problem from the person, real issues can be debated without damaging working relationships.
- **Pay attention to the interests that are being presented:** By listening carefully you'll most likely understand why the person is adopting his or her position.
- **Listen first; talk second:** To solve a problem effectively you have to understand where the other person is coming from before defending your own position.
- **Set out the "Facts":** Agree and establish the objective, observable elements that will have an impact on the decision.
- **Explore options together:** Be open to the idea that a third position may exist, and that you can get to this idea jointly.

By following these rules, you can often keep contentious discussions positive and constructive. This helps to prevent the antagonism and dislike which so often causes conflict to spin out of control.

Using the Tool: A Conflict Resolution Process

Based on these approaches, a starting point for dealing with conflict is to identify the overriding conflict style employed by yourself, your team or your organization.

Over time, people's conflict management styles tend to mesh, and a "right" way to solve conflict emerges. It's good to recognize when this style can be used effectively, however make sure that people understand that different styles may suit different situations.

Look at the circumstances, and think about the style that may be appropriate. Then use the process below to resolve the conflict:

Step One: Set the Scene

If appropriate to the situation, agree the rules of the IBR Approach (or at least consider using the approach yourself.) Make sure that people understand that the conflict may be a mutual problem, which may be best resolved through discussion and negotiation rather than through raw aggression.

If you are involved in the conflict, emphasize the fact that you are presenting your perception of the problem. Use active listening skills to ensure you hear and understand other's positions and perceptions.

- 1. Restate 2. Paraphrase 3. Summarize**

And make sure that when you talk, you're using an adult, assertive approach rather than a submissive or aggressive style.

Step Two: Gather Information

Here you are trying to get to the underlying interests, needs, and concerns. Ask for the other person's viewpoint and confirm that you respect his or her opinion and need his or her cooperation to solve the problem.

Try to understand his or her motivations and goals, and see how your actions may be affecting these.

Also, try to understand the conflict in objective terms: Is it affecting work performance? damaging the delivery to the client? disrupting team work? hampering decision-making? or so on. Be sure to focus on work issues and leave personalities out of the discussion.

1. Listen with empathy and see the conflict from the other person's point of view.
2. Identify issues clearly and concisely.
3. Use "I" statements.
4. Remain flexible.
5. Clarify feelings.

Step Three: Agree the Problem

This sounds like an obvious step, but often different underlying needs, interests and goals can cause people to perceive problems very differently. You'll need to agree the problems that you are trying to solve before you'll find a mutually acceptable solution.

Different people sometimes see different but interlocking problems – if you can't reach a common perception of the problem, then at the very least, you need to understand what the other person sees as the problem.

Step Four: Brainstorm Possible Solutions

If everyone is going to feel satisfied with the resolution, it will help if everyone has had fair input in generating solutions. Brainstorm possible solutions, and be open to all ideas, including ones you never considered before.

Step Five: Negotiate a Solution

By this stage, the conflict may be resolved: Both sides may better understand the position of the other, and a mutually satisfactory solution may be clear to all.

However you may also have uncovered real differences between your positions. This is where a technique like win-win negotiation can be useful to find a solution that, at least to some extent, satisfies everyone.

There are three guiding principles here: **Be Calm, Be Patient, Have Respect...**

Key Points

Conflict in the workplace can be incredibly destructive to good teamwork. Managed in the wrong way, real and legitimate differences between people can quickly spiral out of control, resulting in situations where co-operation breaks down and the team's mission is threatened. This is particularly the case where the wrong approaches to conflict resolution are used.

To calm these situations down, it helps to take a positive approach to conflict resolution, where discussion is courteous and non-confrontational, and the focus is on issues rather than on individuals. If this is done, then, as long as people listen carefully and explore facts, issues and possible solutions properly, conflict can often be resolved effectively.

Group Projects:

A Conflict Resolution Guide for Students

Compiled by Heidi Burgess, Co-Director, University of Colorado Conflict Research Consortium

From grade school all the way through graduate school, teachers assign group projects. These projects can be fun, or they can be very frustrating, as the groups do not always work well together and some people do not seem to carry their fair share. But one of the purposes of group projects is to learn to work well in groups, since many (perhaps most) jobs involve doing group work as well. So learning how to work well in groups is very important to future success. The following guide can help students get the most benefit and least frustration out of group projects.

First step: Clarify the goals and tasks to be accomplished by the whole group. Discuss as a group:

1. What the assignment is (to make sure everyone has the same understanding).
2. When the assignment is due (or when each part is due). (Again, to make sure everyone is aware of the deadlines.)
3. How, exactly, are you going to meet the requirements of the assignment? (For example, if the assignment is to do a research paper, what are you going to research? If it is to build something, what are you going to build?)
4. If you are allowed considerable flexibility, it often helps to brainstorm a number of ideas and then assess the merits of each one separately. Things to consider:
 - o How much do you know about this topic already?
 - o How easy or hard would it be to get good information?
 - o Is the topic interesting to everyone? (If it is not interesting to some, they are not likely to work as hard as they might on a topic they found interesting.)
 - o Can you do a good job on this topic in the available time? With the available people? With the available resources? (Don't overestimate your abilities, but at the same time, don't sell yourselves short. Learning comes from accepting challenge.)

Second step: Once you choose a topic that meets everyone's interests:

1. Work together to break the project up into separate tasks.
2. Assign people and due-dates for each piece.
3. Develop mechanisms for keeping in touch, meeting periodically, and sharing progress (and/or stumbling blocks).

Third Step: As the work proceeds:

1. Keep in touch with each other frequently, reporting progress.
2. If someone is having trouble completing his or her part, work with him or her to try to figure out how to solve the problem. Be supportive and helpful, but don't offer to do other people's work.
3. At the same time, make it clear that the group is depending on everyone doing their part — it is not okay for one person to show up at the last minute without his or her part done.

Fourth Step: Finishing Up

Be sure to leave enough time at the end to put all the pieces together and to make sure everything is done. If you have a presentation at the end, go through the same process — decide who is going to do what, and give everyone enough time to prepare and practice (preferably together) ahead of time. If you can practice together, make constructive suggestions about how team members can do better; don't humiliate or belittle another's presentation. This will just make the other person embarrassed and/or angry and is likely to be counterproductive if your goal is getting a good grade.

Throughout this process, conflict can be avoided (and resolved if it develops) by following certain conflict avoidance guidelines.

Separate the people from the problem. This means separating relationship issues (or “people problems”) from substantive issues, and dealing with them independently. People problems, Fisher, Ury and Patton (1991) observe, tend to involve problems of perception (also called “framing problems”), emotion, and communication.

Things to try to correct perception or framing problems:

1. Try to see the situation from the other person's perspective. You do not have to agree with their perceptions of the situation. But it is important to understand what they think and feel, and why they think and feel as they do.
2. Don't deduce the other person's intentions from your own fears. It is common to assume that your opponent plans to do just what you fear they will do. This sort of suspicious attitude makes it difficult to accurately perceive the other person's real intentions; whatever they do, you will assume the worst.
3. Third, avoid blaming the other person for the problem. Blame, even if it is deserved, will only make him or her defensive. Even worse, he or she may attack you in response. Blame is generally counterproductive.
4. Discuss each other's perceptions. Explicit discussion of each side's perceptions will help both sides to better understand each other (see the first point). And discussion will help each side to avoid projecting their fears onto one another (see the third point). Also, such discussion may reveal shared perceptions. Acknowledging shared perceptions can strengthen the parties' relationship, and facilitate productive negotiations.
5. Seek opportunities to act inconsistently with the other person's misperceptions. That is, try to disappoint your opponent's worst beliefs and expectations about you. Just as it is important for you to have an accurate perception of your opponent, it is also important for them to have an accurate perception of you. Disappointing your opponent's negative or inaccurate beliefs will help to change those beliefs. (Note: these five items were drawn from Tanya Glaser's summary of Fisher, Ury and Patton's *Getting to Yes*, pp. 22-40.)

Dealing with Strong Emotions

Emotional problems include distrust, fear, anger, and humiliation. These emotions are very strong, and can derail any working relationship.

The first step in dealing with emotions is to acknowledge them, and try to understand their source. By saying something like “you seem to be very angry about what happened” you can encourage the other person to explain why they are angry and give you some ideas about how you might be able to fix the situation.

On the other hand, if you ignore or dismiss another's feelings as unreasonable, you are likely to provoke an even more intense emotional response.

Allow the other side to express their emotions without reacting emotionally yourself (unless strong emotions are expected in your culture). If they are not, it is usually best to allow the other person to express their emotions, and then use empathic or active listening to try to understand both the content and the emotion of the message they tried to express.

Symbolic gestures such as apologies or an expression of sympathy can help to defuse strong emotions.

Using Effective Communication

Several communication strategies can avoid misunderstandings and/or correct them once they occur. These include:

1. Focus on the person speaking when they are speaking. Don't listen with one ear, while planning your come back at the same time
2. When it is your time to respond, think quietly for a minute until you know what you want to say and how you want to say it. Don't just blurt out a response without thinking.
3. Use active (or empathic) listening, discussed above, which allows you to confirm that you understood both the substantive content and the feelings behind the words.
4. Use I-messages, which allow you to express your feelings without directly attacking the other person (which would likely evoke a defensive and/or hostile response).

Focus on Interests, Not Positions

Good agreements focus on the parties' interests, rather than their positions. As Fisher, Ury, and Patton explain, "Your position is something you have decided upon. Your interests are what caused you to so decide." [p. 42] Defining a problem in terms of positions means that at least one party will "lose" the dispute. When a problem is defined in terms of the parties' underlying interests it is often possible to find a solution which satisfies both parties' interests. (See the "Getting to Yes" summary for more information.)

So if your workgroup gets into a conflict over who is to do what by when, try not to argue about who is right and who is wrong. (This is a position.) Rather, look at the reasons why people feel the way they do. Why does one person feel that his deadline is unfair or impossible to meet? Is there something that can be done to make his workload more manageable without unfairly taxing the other team members? Try to discover what needs and interests are underneath a person's demands or positions to see what the real problem is about. Very often, it is a problem that can be solved to mutual advantage if it is dealt with openly.

Look for Creative Solutions to Problems

People often assume that the problem with their team is that there is something wrong with one of the other team members. If you separate the people from the problem (as discussed above) and then look for creative solutions to the substantive problems, win-win solutions can often be found. Try working together as a team to brainstorm solutions to the problem (rather than assuming it is just one person's problem). This will enable the person having trouble to feel supported, and is likely to generate ideas that no one alone might have come up with.

Brainstorm a lot of ideas — even wild and crazy ones — before you assess their merits. Don't dismiss anything initially — you can do that later once a better idea comes up. Once you have a number of options to choose from, then discuss the merits and problems of each approach and choose the one that looks best.

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The Beyond Intractability Knowledge Base Project

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