

Managing Conflict

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Abstract—*This is conceptual paper based on secondary research. Conflict is inevitable in any interpersonal relationship and can be a very positive experience, if managed properly. Why do we shy away from dealing with conflict? Many of us were raised to believe that conflict is something to be avoided, and is an experience of failure. However, conflict doesn't have to lead to failure, defeat, separation or termination of individual relationships. We all come to see the world in different ways, and we have different ideas about what's best for us and what's best for our group. It is actually a signal that change is needed and possible.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The ability to manage conflict is probably one of the most important social skills an individual can possess. This information is designed to help you acquire this skill. Specifically, it will offer information about:

- The different ways in which people deal with conflict.
- Increasing awareness of your own style of conflict management.
- A constructive method of conflict management which will not only lead to greater satisfaction of both parties involved, but also promote growth and development of your group.

Competing

An individual pursues his/her own concerns at the other person's expense. This is a power-oriented mode, in which one uses whatever power seems appropriate to win one's own position. Competing might mean "standing up for your rights," defending a position which you believe correct, or simply trying to influence others.

Accommodating

The opposite of competing. When accommodating, an individual neglects his/her own concerns to satisfy the concerns of the other person; there is an element of self-sacrifice in this mode. Accommodating might take the form of selfless generosity or charity, obeying another person's order when one would prefer not to, or yielding to another's point of view.

Avoiding

The individual does not immediately pursue his/her own concerns or those of the other person if he/she does not

address the conflict. Avoiding might take the form of diplomatically sidestepping an issue, postponing an issue until a better time or simply withdrawing from a threatening situation.

Compromising

The objective is to find some expedient, mutually acceptable solution which partially satisfies both parties. It falls on a middle ground between competing and accommodating. Compromising gives up more than competing but less than accommodating. Likewise, it addresses an issue more directly than avoiding, but doesn't explore it in as much depth as collaborating. Compromising might mean splitting the difference, exchanging concessions, or seeking a quick middle-ground position.

Collaborating

The opposite of avoiding, collaborating involves an attempt to work with the other person to find some solution which fully satisfies the concerns of both. It means digging into an issue to identify the underlying concerns of the two individuals and to find a solution which meets both sets of concerns. This is clearly the most effective approach of conflict management. Specifically it will produce the following results:

1. Both sides' needs are met
2. Satisfaction
3. Mutual respect
4. Both parties feel enriched rather than belittled
5. Continuing effort of both parties to work together

How to Use the Collaborating Approach (Win-Win Negotiation) To Deal with Conflicts in Student Organizations

Diagnosis is the starting point - determining the nature of the conflict.

1. **Is the issue a value conflict?** It is extremely difficult to negotiate when the conflict is regarding a personal value. An example: a dispute over whether alcohol should be prohibited at a fundraising dance.

2. **Is the issue a difference of expectations of each other?**

Understanding this type of conflict lies in the fact that each of us have different expectations which grow out of our experiences with the organization. When we interact with others whose expectations have grown out of their own unique experiences with the organization, conflict arises.

Initiation is the second step.

1. The most effective way to confront another in a conflict situation is to state the tangible effect the conflict has on you.
2. Example: "We have a concern in our committee. Although your position on keeping a low budget for the officer training retreat is understandable it restricts us from having the retreat off campus, which is the desire of most members."

Active Listening is the third step - negotiators must be capable of hearing the other's point of view.

1. While listening, do not think about what to reply in order to persuade.
2. Argument-provoking replies should be avoided.
3. Active listening involves paraphrasing or restating what the other says. Idea or content should be considered as well as feeling.

Problem Solving is the final step.

1. Clarify the problem. After the above steps, each party should have a clear idea about what is the tangible issue.
2. Talk about what's needed/wanted (be clear on facts and information).
3. Generate a list of possible solutions. While doing this, let go of the solutions that you thought you had. Be creative! The best negotiator makes the other side feel good. Start by thinking "how can I make the other side happy?"
4. Decide together on the best solution acceptable to all parties, use consensus decision making skills. Don't try to persuade or coerce.
5. Plan the implementation of the solution. Make assignments of who, what, where, when and how. Plan an evaluation or review of the solution after a specified period of time.

All five styles of conflict management obviously have advantages and disadvantages. When dealing with conflict in personal relationships, any of these types may be useful in certain situations. The last style, collaboration, however, is highly recommended for dealing with conflict in student organizations. It results in something satisfactory to both parties. People often feel proud of themselves and feel a sense of personal power when they use this method. It's a sign of integrity and self-confidence when one is able to use this method with patience regardless of how difficult the situation may be.

Two Issues Which You Might Have To Deal With When Confronting A Conflict

People who won't negotiate

Some people refuse to negotiate because they want to protect their special interests or privileges. Here are a few steps to take in dealing with such people.

1. Start to negotiate anyway.
2. Explain why it is in their interest to negotiate, why it is worthwhile to deal with the problems existing between you.
3. Talk about problems and how the collaboration will help them solve their problems or others' problems. Share the problem. For example, bring to their attention the joint image that you're two sub-groups for the organization.

When trust is an issue

Here are a few suggestions for this problem.

1. Be trustworthy. Do what you said you would do.
2. Find a higher value that you both agree on. For example, you both want to project a positive image.
3. Listen.
4. Make an agreement in such a way that you know when it is carried out.
5. Start small.
6. There are people who simply can't/won't trust you, but do your best anyway.

Conflict Resolution

Resolving Conflict Rationally and Effectively

Resolve conflict effectively, with James Manktelow & Amy Carlson.

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 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:

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. They developed the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) which 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 type of conflict resolution 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.

- Restate.
- Paraphrase.
- 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.

- Listen with empathy and see the conflict from the other person's point of view.
- Identify issues clearly and concisely.
- Use "I" statements.
- Remain flexible.
- 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.

Sometimes different people will 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.

2. CONCLUSION

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.

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