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# Managing Conflicts to ensure Smooth Organisational Functioning

## ABSTRACT

Conflict is a process in which an effort is purposely made, by a person or a group, to offset the effort of another person or a group by some form of blocking that will result in frustrating the latter and attaining his or her goals or furthering his or her interests. Conflict is inevitable and often good, for example, good teams always go through a “form, storm, norm and perform” period. Getting the most out of diversity means often-contradictory values, perspectives and opinions. Conflict is not the same as discomfort. The conflict isn't the problem - it is when conflict is poorly managed that is the problem. It is estimated that managers in various organizations spend 20% of their time in conflict resolution. Business houses spend a lot of time figuring out how to avoid conflicts from cropping up at all. Conflicts also arise due to confusion in the roles of the employees in an organization. Conflicts are not always unhealthy. A healthy conflict can lead to stimulating search for improved approaches to an existing system. Conflicts, once resolved, can lead to better final results. The main objective of this paper is to examine the cause, effects and the remedial actions taken to reduce conflicts in an organization.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Conflict management refers to the long-term management of intractable conflicts. It is the label for the variety of ways by which people handle grievances — standing up for what they consider to be right and against what they consider to be wrong. Those ways include such diverse phenomena as gossip, ridicule, lynching, terrorism, warfare, feuding, genocide, law, mediation, and avoidance. Which forms of conflict management will be used in any given situation can be somewhat predicted and explained by the social structure — or social geometry — of the case.

Conflict management is often considered to be distinct from conflict resolution. In order for actual conflict to occur, there should be an expression of exclusive patterns, and tell why the conflict was expressed the way it was. Conflict is not just about simple inaptness, but is often connected to a previous issue. The latter refers to resolving the dispute to the approval of one or both parties, whereas the former concerns an ongoing process that may never

• have a resolution. Neither is it considered the  
• same as conflict transformation, which seeks  
• to reframe the positions of the conflict parties.

• Members taking part in a discussion  
• may not always be in agreement. This  
• disagreement between the members of a  
• group can have several outcomes of varying  
• magnitudes. One should try and understand  
• the process of conflict to which the  
• disagreement may give rise to be manage and  
• control it. Conflict is a process in which  
• an effort is purposely made, by a person  
• or a group, to offset the effort of  
• another person or a group by some form  
• of blocking that will result in frustrating  
• the latter n attaining his or her goals or  
• furthering his or her interests.

• The sequence of events which  
• happen in a process of conflict is;  
• presence of conditions that create  
• opportunities for conflict to arise; the  
• effected parties taking cognizance of the  
• conflict; actions start taking place to  
• frustrate others attempt; resulting in  
• various outcomes. All these four stages  
• constitute the process of conflict. All

disagreements are not necessarily conflicts, but all conflicts are definitely disagreements. Whenever human interactions take place, agreements, disagreements and conflicts are bound to happen.

## 2. CAUSES OF CONFLICTS

The *causes of conflicts* can be any of the following-

### a) Non-complementary Transactions:

Improper estimation of ego states in people/clients/customer while transacting with them could lead to damaging their self-image and self-esteem. One could be handling a customer who is in the child state and send stimuli to the parent state of the supplier's salesperson by repeatedly asking for a discount on the purchase price. If the salesperson start giving logical arguments in an adult-to-adult transaction mode he is likely to run into rough weather. Such non-complementary transactions can give rise to a conflict. Here, the salesperson should have replied from his parent state to the child state of the customer in order to avoid the conflict.

### b) Differences in Perception of people Involved in the Transaction towards a communication:

Every person has his own perception of looking at things. Thus a internal memo circulated by the GM of an organization to all staff member saying that "All staff members are requested to come into office at sharp 9.00 am" can elicit different sorts o responses from different members. One person might feel it to be perfectly normal and healthy to promote discipline in the office; another might feel that it is wrong as he work late in the night, and it should not be expected of him to come on time. An habitual latecomer may feel that it has been made to target people like him, and thus be on the defensive and a punctual person may feel it is immaterial as he is

always on time and there is no reason for such a note to people like him.

### c) Due to Diverse Interests of Groups in an Organization:

In an organization, there are groups of people and departments with diverse interests. These differences provide a basis for conflicts. The ideology of Labour union and the Management are very different. In several organizations the labour union follows the communist philosophy and the management follows the capitalist philosophy. There is a consist tussle in an organization between the Quality department and the Production department. Due to pressures, the Production department, at times, is a bit lenient when it comes to stringent quality check. However, the Quality department might not allow even this small amount of laps. This gives rise to conflict. In the global arena, there is a constant conflict between the issues of growth and maintaining environmental resources.

### d) The pyramidal organizational structure by itself breeds power struggle, conflict and politics:

The organization structure is pyramidal. There is one Managing Director at the top and, down the ladder, the number of people increase across the depth and breadth of an organization. This gives rise to the pyramidal structure. There is the basic need of human beings for recognition and power. All the employees strive to go up the ladder as far as they can. As the number of seats available from the bottom to the top decreases, there is an element of competition, which automatically sets in among employees of the same grade, to be promoted to the next level. This starts in a simple and healthy fashion, and later may develop into a power struggle, conflict and internal politics. Once out of proportions, it gives rise to a lot of bad blood and negative work culture.

e) **Unresolved Problem Issues:** “Swept under the carpet” give rise to major conflicts at a later date. There is a normal tendency among people of not touching sensitive issues. Thus the Industrial Relations person tries not to muddle with the wage policy, the Government does not try to address openly sticky issues. Thus the industrial Relations person tries not to muddle with the wage policy, the Government does try to address openly sticky issues like unemployment or resolve the dispute on borders of two countries. Such issues are more likely to be swept under the carpet because the comfort level of people in dealing with these issues is very low. These issues are touchy and tend to escalate with the passage of time. One can well imagine that the above mentioned issues can lead to a strike, a change of Government or a war between the countries.

One has to be sensitive to these issues and realize that conflicts cannot be wiped out totally from organizations. However, they can be dealt with in a mature way so as to reach a

sound and a fair solution. Most common complaint topics which occur in organizations are listed in the table 1.

### 3. CATEGORIES OF CONFLICT

There are two categories of conflicts

- a. **Inter-personal Conflict:** Conflict between two people, e.g. conflict between sales manager who is constantly pushing for more sales and the sales executives, who feels the manager is being unfair.
- b. **Inter-group Conflicts:** Conflicts between people of different groups with different ideologies e.g. conflict between the labour union and the management, or between the Communists and the Capitalists.

### 4. CLARIFYING CONFUSION ABOUT CONFLICT

Conflict is when two or more values, perspectives and opinions are contradictory in nature and haven't been aligned or agreed about yet, including:

- Within yourself when you're not living according to your values;

**TABLE:1**  
**COMPLAINT TOPICS IN ORGANISATIONS**

TOPIC	REPRESENTATIVE COMPLAINT
Wages standards	I am underpaid in comparison to a co-worker, as per the industry
Incentive system	The way it's set up, nobody in our department can get a bonus
Promotion	I'm long overdue for consideration for a job upgrade.
Discipline	I was suspended without being given a fair warning.
Work Assignments	I always get assigned to the jobs which are under 'fire fighting' situation. It stresses me.
Discrimination	I was not trained on computers because I am 55 years old.
Sexual Harassment	The ladies in our department get away with any quality of work and I have to do the salvaging for them.
Layoff	It wasn't fair to lay me off. I had more seniority than three of the employees who weren't laid off.
Safety and health	I refuse to run the photocopying machine unless there is a contract signed up for regular maintenance. It keeps on giving electric shocks.
Job Evaluation	My job should be rated higher. It requires more skill and education than other jobs that pay much more.
Favoritism	I get the dirty assignments because I'm not one of the boss's fishing buddies.

- When your values and perspectives are threatened; or
- Discomfort from fear of the unknown or from lack of fulfillment.

**a. Conflict is often needed when it**

- Helps to raise and address problems.
- Energizes work to be on the most appropriate issues.
- Helps people “be real”, for example, it motivates them to participate.
- Helps people learn how to recognize and benefit from their differences.
- Conflict is not the same as discomfort. The conflict isn’t the problem - it is when conflict is poorly managed that is the problem.

**b. Conflict is a problem when it**

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

**5. TYPES OF MANAGERIAL ACTIONS THAT CAUSE WORKPLACE CONFLICTS**

**a. Poor communications**

- Employees experience continuing surprises, they aren’t informed of new decisions, programs, etc.
- Employees don’t understand reasons for decisions, they aren’t involved in decision-making.
- As a result, employees trust the “rumor mill” more than management.

**b. The alignment or the amount of resources is insufficient. There is**

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

**c. “Personal chemistry”, including conflicting values or actions among managers and employees, for example**

- Strong personal natures don’t match.
- We often don’t like in others what we don’t like in ourselves.

**d. Leadership problems, including 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 don’t understand the jobs of their subordinates.

**6. KEY MANAGERIAL ACTIONS/ STEPS TO MINIMIZE CONFLICTS**

1. Regularly review job descriptions. Get your employee’s input to them. Write down job descriptions. Ensure:
  - a. Job roles don’t conflict.
  - b. No tasks “fall in a crack”.
2. Intentionally build relationships with all subordinates.
  - a. Meet at least once a month alone with them in office.
  - b. Ask about accomplishments, challenges and issues.
3. Get regular, written status reports and include:
  - a. Accomplishments.
  - b. Currents issues and needs from pmanagement.
  - c. Plans for the upcoming period.
4. Conduct basic training about:
  - a. Interpersonal communications.
  - b. Conflict management.
  - c. Delegation.
5. Develop procedures for routine tasks and include the employees’ input.
  - a. Have employees write procedures when possible and appropriate.
  - b. Get employees’ review of the procedures.
  - c. Distribute the procedures.
  - d. Train employees about the procedures.
6. Regularly hold management meetings, for example, every month, to communicate new initiatives and status of current

programs.

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

## 7. WAYS PEOPLE DEAL WITH CONFLICT

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. Avoid it.** Pretend it is not there or ignore it. Use it when it simply is not worth the effort to argue. Usually this approach tends to worsen the conflict over time.

**2. Accommodate it.** 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. Competing.** Work to get your way, rather than clarifying and addressing the issue. Competitors love accommodators. Use when you have a very strong conviction about your position.

**4. Compromising.** Mutual give-and-take. Use when the goal is to get past the issue and move on.

**5. Collaborating.** Focus on working together. Use when the goal is to meet as many current needs as possible by using mutual resources. This approach sometimes raises new mutual needs. Use when the goal is to cultivate ownership and commitment.

## 8. TO MANAGE A CONFLICT WITHIN YOURSELF - "CORE PROCESS"

It's often in the trying that we find solace, not in getting the best solution. The following steps will help you in this regard.

1. Name the conflict, or identify the issue, including what you want that you aren't

getting. Consider:

- a. Writing your thoughts down to come to a conclusion.
  - b. Talk to someone, including asking them to help you summarize the conflict in 5 sentences or less.
2. Get perspective by discussing the issue with your friend or by putting it down in writing. Consider:
    - a. How important is this issue?
    - b. Does the issue seem worse because you're tired, angry at something else, etc.?
    - c. What's your role in this issue?
  3. Pick at least one thing you can do about the conflict.
    - a. Identify at least three courses of action.
    - b. For each course, write at least three pros and cons.
    - c. Select an action - if there is no clear course of action, pick the alternative that will not hurt, or be least hurtful, to yourself and others.
    - d. Briefly discuss that course of action with a friend.
  4. Then do something.
    - a. Wait at least a day before you do anything about the conflict. This gives you
      - a. cooling off period.
      - b. Then take an action.
      - c. Have in your own mind, a date when you will act again if you see no clear improvement.

## 9. TO MANAGE A CONFLICT WITH ANOTHER - "CORE PROCESS"

1. Know what you don't like about yourself, early on in your career. We often don't like in others what we don't want to see in ourselves.
  - a. Write down 5 traits that really bug you when see them in others.
  - b. Be aware that these traits are your "hot buttons".

2. Manage yourself. If you and/or the other person are getting heated up, then manage yourself to stay calm by
  - a. Speaking to the person as if the other person is not heated up - this can be very effective!
  - b. Avoid use of the word “you” - this avoids blaming.
  - c. Nod your head to assure them you heard them.
  - d. Maintain eye contact with them.
3. Move the discussion to a private area, if possible.
4. Give the other person time to vent.
  - a. Don’t interrupt them or judge what they are saying.
5. Verify that you’re accurately hearing each other. When they are done speaking: }
  - a. Ask the other person to let you rephrase (uninterrupted) what you are hearing from them to ensure you are hearing them.
  - b. To understand them more, ask open-ended questions. Avoid “why” questions - those questions often make people feel defensive.
6. Repeat the above step, this time for them to verify that they are hearing you. When you present your position
  - a. Use “I”, not “you”.
  - b. Talk in terms of the present as much as possible.
  - c. Mention your feelings.
7. Acknowledge where you disagree and where you agree.
8. Work the issue, not the person. When they are convinced that you understand them:

- a. Ask “What can we do fix the problem?” They will likely begin to complain again. Then ask the same question. Focus on actions they can do, too.
9. If possible, identify at least one action that can be done by one or both of you.
  - a. Ask the other person if they will support the action.
  - b. If they will not, then ask for a “cooling off period”.
10. Thank the person for working with you.
11. If the situation remains a conflict, then:
  - a. Conclude if the other person’s behavior conflicts with policies and procedures in the workplace and if so, present the issue to your supervisor.
  - b. Consider whether to agree to disagree.
  - c. Consider seeking a third party to mediate.

## 10. CONCLUSION

To conclude we can say that healthy conflicts are desirable in an organization. However, conflicts must be solved at the earliest or else they can have a devastating effect on the culture of the organization as a whole. The easiest way to prevent conflicts from happening is by ensuring a smooth flow of information and feedback along the organization. One should realize that no situation is utopian, and in any organization, there is always some amount of power struggle, politics and conflict, which keeps on happening in varying intensities.

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