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# Managing Conflict

## Introduction

Conflict is inevitable in organizations because the goals, needs and values of groups and individuals do not always coincide. Conflict may be a sign of a healthy organization. Bland agreement on everything would be unnatural and enervating. There should be clashes of ideas about tasks and projects, and disagreements should not be suppressed. They should come out into the open because that is the only way to ensure that issues are explored and conflicts resolved.

There is such a thing as creative conflict – new or modified ideas, insights, approaches and solutions can be generated by a joint examination of different points of view as long as this is based on an objective and rational exchange of information and ideas. But conflict becomes counterproductive when it is based on personality clashes, or when it is treated as an unseemly mess to be cleared away, rather than a problem to be worked through.

Managing conflict is a matter of resolving the issues that create disagreement, whether it arises between groups (inter-group conflict) or between individuals.

## Managing inter-group conflict

There are four ways of managing inter-group conflict: peaceful coexistence, compromise, problem-solving, and, as an aspect of organizational development, conflict interventions.

### Peaceful coexistence

The aim here is to smooth out differences and emphasize common ground. People are encouraged to learn to live together; there is a great deal of information, contact and exchange of views, and individuals move freely between groups (for example, between headquarters and the field, or between marketing and operations).

This is a pleasant ideal, but it may not be practicable in many circumstances. There is much evidence that conflict is not resolved by bringing people together. Improved communications and techniques such as briefing groups may appear to be good ideas, but are useless if management has nothing to say that people want to hear. There is also a danger that the real issues, submerged for the moment in an atmosphere of superficial bonhomie, will surface again later.

## Compromise

Comprise means resolving the issue by negotiation or bargaining, and the essentially pessimistic process of splitting the difference. The hallmark of this process is that there is no 'right' or 'best' answer. Agreements only accommodate differences. Real issues are unlikely to be solved.

## Problem solving

Problem solving involves attempting to find a genuine solution to the problem rather than just accommodating different points of view. This is where the apparent paradox of 'creative conflict' comes in. Conflict solving aims to integrate and build on different contributions in order to create better solutions.

If solutions are to be developed by problem solving, they have to be generated by those who share the responsibility for seeing that the solution works. The sequence of actions is:

1. Those concerned work to define the problem and agree on objectives to be attained by a solution.

2. The group develops alternative solutions and debates their merits.

3. Agreement is reached on the preferred course of action and how it should be implemented.

This process can usefully be facilitated by a third party, as described at the end of this chapter.

## Inter-group conflict interventions

As developed by Blake *et al* (1964), these aim to improve inter-group relations by getting groups to share their perceptions of one another and to analyse what they have learnt about themselves and the other group. The groups involved meet each other to share what they have learnt, and to agree on the issues to be resolved and the actions required.

# Managing conflict between individuals

Handling conflict between individuals can be even more difficult than resolving conflicts between groups. Whether the conflict is openly hostile or subtly covert, strong personal feelings may be involved. Like inter-group conflict, interpersonal conflict is an organizational

reality which is not necessarily good or bad. It can be either productive or non-productive. Problems usually arise when potential conflict is artificially suppressed, or when it increases beyond the control of the adversaries or third-party intermediaries.

## Approaches to resolution

Ware and Barnes (1991) identified the following methods of resolving conflict.

### Withdrawal

Either party may withdraw, leaving the other one to hold the field. This is the classic win/lose situation or zero-sum game. The winner may be triumphant but the loser will be aggrieved and either demotivated or resolved to fight another day. There will have been a lull in the conflict, but not an end to it.

### Smooth out differences

Pretend the conflict does not exist, although no attempt has been made to tackle the root causes. Again, this is unsatisfactory. The issue is likely to re-emerge and the battle will recommence.

### Bargaining

An attempt may be made to reach a compromise through bargaining. This means that both sides are prepared to lose as well as win some points, and the aim is to reach a solution acceptable to both sides. However, bargaining involves all sorts of tactical and often counterproductive games, and the parties are often more anxious to seek acceptable compromises than to achieve sound solutions.

### Preventing interaction

Conflict is controlled by keeping people apart so that, although the differences still exist, those involved have the chance to cool down and consider more constructive approaches. But this may only be a temporary expedient, and the eventual confrontation could be even more explosive.

### Structuring interaction

Ground rules are developed to deal with the issues. But this may also be a temporary expedient if the strong underlying feelings are only suppressed rather than resolved.

### Personal counselling

This may give the parties a chance to release pent-up feelings and encourage them to think about new ways of resolving the conflict. But it might not deal with the essential nature of the conflict, which is the relationship between two people.

## Constructive confrontation

This is a method of bringing the conflicting individuals together, ideally with a third party whose function is to help build an exploratory and cooperative climate by getting them to understand and explore the other's perceptions and feelings. The issues will be confronted but by means of a joint analysis of factors relating to the situation and the behaviour of those involved. Feelings will be expressed but they will be analysed by reference to specific events rather than inferences or speculation about motives.

Constructive confrontation is the approach most likely to deal with conflict, but it is not an easy option. Much depends on the third party using exacting skills, as described below.

# The role of the third party in managing conflict

Ideally, those involved in conflict will resolve it by discussing the issues sensibly and reaching an integrated and constructive solution. But life is not always like that. As mentioned above, problem-solving solutions to resolve inter-group conflict, and constructive confrontation to manage conflict between individuals, provide more hope of success, but they may need the services of a third party. This could be a member of the HR function or an outside consultant. The skills needed are facilitating when dealing with groups and counselling when handling individuals.

## Facilitating skills

Dealing with inter-group conflict may mean facilitating meetings of the groups involved separately and/or bringing them together to discuss their problems and, it is hoped, come to an agreed conclusion. Getting groups together is desirable, but the facilitating skills required are considerable. The principal ones a facilitator needs when dealing with any group are:

- Building rapport: creating a harmonious and understanding relationship in which everyone is at ease. This is done by gaining an understanding of how the group is functioning and the issues with which its members are concerned, and by 'matching' your language and behaviour with theirs.

- Setting the scene: ensuring that everyone knows why the group has assembled and getting them to develop ground rules on how it should function.

- Progressing: helping the group to agree what it is there to achieve, reviewing progress with it from time to time, and summarizing what has been achieved, making suggestions for the group to consider on future directions.

- Controlling with a light touch: acting as a calming influence if the discussion gets too heated.

- Getting everyone involved: ensuring that everyone in the group has the opportunity to have a say without allowing anyone to hog the discussion.

- Actively listening: giving people your full attention, reflecting back to people what they have said, and making it clear that you understand what they are saying and their point of view.

- Asking questions: creating better understanding of the situation and encouraging members of the group to think through the issues by asking for information on the factors involved, the behaviours of those concerned and their feelings about them.

- Being non-judgemental: not making comments, adverse or otherwise, on the situation or behaviours; eliciting the facts and allowing them to speak for themselves.

- Helping the group to function: providing help as required by suggesting possible ways for the group to tackle the issues facing it (but not telling them how to do it).

- Encouraging the group to develop its own solutions: as a facilitator your prime role is to get group members to think cooperatively for themselves and come up with the answers. You are not there to do their thinking for them.

## Counselling skills

The counselling skills you need when dealing with individuals are similar in many ways to the facilitating skills needed when handling group conflict. They are:

- Listen actively.

- Observe as well as listen.

- Help people to understand and define the problem by asking pertinent, open-ended questions.

- Recognize feelings and allow them to be expressed.

- Help people define problems for themselves.

- Encourage people to explore alternative solutions.

- Get people to develop their own implementation plans but provide help and advice if asked.

# Conclusion

Conflict is in itself not to be deplored: it is an inevitable concomitant of progress and change. What is regrettable is a failure to use conflict constructively. Effective problem solving, constructive confrontation and the use of facilitating and counselling skills can also open up channels of discussion and cooperative action.

Many years ago one of the pioneering writers on management, Mary Parker Follett (1924), wrote something on managing conflict which is as valid today as it was then:

> *Differences can be made to contribute to the common cause if they are resolved by integration rather than domination or compromise.*

# References

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