

Understanding Interpersonal and Group Conflict 101

I. Definitions of *conflict*:

- Conflict is a natural *disagreement* resulting between individuals or groups that differ in attitudes, beliefs, values, needs, or preferences for action. It can also originate from past rivalries and personality differences.
- Conflict is a *disagreement* through which the parties involved perceive a *threat* to their needs, interests, or concerns.
- 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.

Within these definitions, there are several important points that emerge:

1. 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.
2. Parties involved [individuals and/or groups] - 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. Often, 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.
3. 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.

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," or "Just get over it."

4. Needs, interests or concerns - *Needs* are things that are essential to our well-being. Conflicts arise when we ignore others' needs, our own needs, or the group's needs. Be careful not to confuse needs with desires (things we would like, but are not essential).

There is a tendency to narrowly define "the problem" as one of substance, task, and near-term viability. However, organizational 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.

As in any problem, conflicts contain [1] substantive, [2] procedural, and [3] 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.

Specifically, it is critical to understand that these three things are not the same:

- *Issues* are the "what" of negotiations--what the parties disagree about
- *Interests* are the "why" of negotiations--why each party wants what it wants and feels strongly about it
- *Positions* are the "how" of negotiations--statements about how an issue might be addressed. [Dale & Hahn, 1994]

5. Perceptions - People interpret reality differently. They perceive differences in the severity, causes and consequences of problems. Misperceptions or differing perceptions may come from: self-perceptions, others' perceptions, differing perceptions of situations and perceptions of threat.

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.

6. Power - How people define and use power is an important influence on the number and types of conflicts that occur. This also influences how conflict is managed. Conflicts can arise when people try to make others change their actions or to gain an unfair advantage.
7. Values - Values are beliefs or principles we consider to be very important. Serious conflicts arise when people hold incompatible values or when values are not clear. Conflicts also arise when one party refuses to accept the fact that the other party holds something as a value rather than a preference.
8. Conflicts are normal experiences within every kind of organization. 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.

II. Key points from research:

- Conflict can be either a positive or a negative force, according to the way it is addressed. Some organizations have been rendered ineffective, even immobilized by conflict, while others have addressed their conflict positively and become even more effective in achieving their goals.
- 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.
- Conflict “moves around” in organizations in ways that are not readily noticeable, and it is easy to overlook the fact that where the conflict becomes manifest may be quite removed from where it originates. [K. Smith, 1989]
- A strategy that seems ideal during the strategic planning process may fail—and actually make matters worse—because it creates new conflicts that the organization’s leaders know nothing about how to manage. The conflicts may erupt explosively, be pushed underground, or seen to be occurring “coincidentally” by something other than the planning strategy. [K. Smith, 1989]
- Finally, we should keep in mind that the decision to become involved in conflict resolution 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 participation.

III. Conflict models: conflicts between individuals

A. Leadership choices about conflict:

- Prevent destructive conflict whenever possible
- Resolve destructive conflict if you can
- Manage destructive conflict that isn't resolvable

B. Basic personal stances:

1. Avoidance: "There is no real conflict."
2. Accommodation: "Anything to make you happy."
3. Coercion: "You'll feel better when it's settled, so do it my way."
4. Compromise: "Let's break the candy bar apart and each take half."
5. Negotiation: "Under these conditions I'm willing to do this if you will do that."
6. Collaboration: "We'll stick together on this no matter how widely it separates us."

C. Steps to managing conflict: [Hollyhock Institute]

1. Analyze the conflict
2. Determine your management strategy
3. Pre-negotiation
4. Negotiation
5. Post-negotiation

D. Types of conflict [STP model]:

Situation/facts

Targets/goals and values conflict

Proposals/strategies

IV. Conflict models, conflicts between groups

A. Dealing with intergroup conflict [Feldman, 1985]:

- Intergroup conflict refers to overt expressions of hostility between groups or their intentional interference with one another's activities.
- The primary dimension along which intergroup conflict-resolution strategies vary is how openly they address the conflict.

1. The chief characteristic of conflict-avoidance strategies is that they attempt to keep the conflict from coming into the open.

Ignoring the conflict
Imposing a solution

2. The goal of conflict-defusion strategies is to keep the conflict in abeyance and to "cool" the emotions of the parties involved.

"Smoothing"
Appealing to superordinate goals

3. Conflict-containment strategies allow some conflict to surface, but tightly control which issues are discussed and the manner in which they are discussed.

Using representatives
Structuring interaction between the groups
Bargaining

4. Conflict-confrontation strategies are designed to uncover all the issues of the conflict and to try to find a mutually satisfactory solution.

Problem-solving
Organizational redesign

- Again, the main dimension along which intergroup conflict-resolution strategies are arrayed is *how openly participants are willing to address the conflict*.
- Which strategy is most effective depends on how critical the conflict is to task accomplishment and how quickly the conflict must be resolved.

B. Interest group negotiation for polarized groups [Dale & Hahn, 1994]:

1. Pre-negotiation phase

Getting started
Representation
Ground rules and agenda
Problem definition
Joint fact-finding

2. Negotiation phase

Criteria development
Generating alternatives
Evaluation and creating agreements
Binding the parties to the agreements
Producing a written document of agreement
Ratification

3. Implementation phase

Linking information agreements to formal decision making
Monitoring implementation

Two men were quarreling in a library. One wanted the window open, the other wanted it closed. They bickered back and forth over how much to leave it open: just a crack, halfway, three-quarters.

They were arguing so loudly the librarian came over to find out what was the matter. She asked one man why he wanted the window open. He replied: "To get some fresh air." She asked the other why he wanted it closed. He said, "To avoid a draft."

After thinking a moment, the librarian left, went into the next room, and threw open the window, bringing in fresh air without a draft.

The two men viewed their problem as a conflict over positions and limited their discussion to those positions. If the librarian also had focused only on the two men's stated positions, the dispute would not have been resolved with both men receiving benefits. By looking instead at the men's underlying interests, the librarian invented a mutually acceptable solution. Solutions reconcile interests, not positions.

Adapted from Fisher & Ury (1981)

C. Managing public conflict [<http://www2.ctic.purdue.edu>]

- Public conflict is quite different from private conflict. Most people have had experiences with conflict management and negotiation in private disputes (with a salesman, among family members or with an employer).
- Public conflicts are often rooted in trying to balance two important values [a “right vs. right” issue, rather than a “right vs. wrong” issue]. There is infinitely more need for skill and transparency when dealing with public conflicts.
- Basic strategies for managing public conflict:

1. *Collaboration* is best when there is a high concern for the group’s interests, matched with a high concern for the interests of the other party. The outcome desired is “win/win.” This strategy is generally used when concerns for others are important to both sides; done right, it helps build commitment and reduces bad feelings. It is also generally the best strategy when society’s interests are at stake.

The drawbacks are that it takes time, energy, and a skilled facilitator. In addition, sometimes, one party tries to take advantage of the other party’s openness and trust. The objective of collaboration is to reach consensus.

2. *Compromise* is best when there is a high concern for the group’s interests, matched with a moderate concern for the interest of the other party. The outcome desired is “win some/lose some.” This strategy is generally used to achieve temporary solutions, to avoid destructive power struggles, or when time pressures exist.

The drawbacks are that the parties can lose sight of important values and long-term objectives, and they can be distracted from the merits of an issue by creating a cynical climate.

3. *Competition* is best when there is a high concern for the group’s interests, matched with less concern for others. The outcome desired is “win/lose.” This strategy includes most attempts at bargaining, and is generally used when basic rights are at stake or to set an important precedent. The drawbacks are that it often causes the conflict to escalate, or, post-conflict, it sets the scene for retaliation by the losers.

4. *Accommodation* is best when there is a low concern for the group's own interests combined with a high concern for the interests of the other party. The outcome is "lose/win." This strategy is generally used when the issue is more important to the other party than to "my party." It constitutes a "goodwill gesture." It is also appropriate when a party realizes that they have been wrong on an issue.

The drawbacks are that "my party's" own ideas and concerns are usually inadequately addressed [if addressed at all], and "my party" may also lose credibility and future influence.

5. *Avoidance* results from a low concern for both parties' interests, and the outcome is "lose/lose." This strategy is generally used when the issue is trivial or other issues are more pressing. This strategy is best used when public confrontation has a high potential for doing harm, or when important information is needed. The drawbacks are that important decisions may be made by default.

D. Organizational feuds

Organizational feuds differ from more typical conflict in three ways:

- The feuding partners engage in intense, personal attacks, usually out of all proportion to the issue at hand.
- Even though the issues may change, the feuding partners almost always sort out along the same dividing lines. Agreement on any issue whatsoever is rare.
- Organizational feuds persist. Lifetimes of months or years are typical. They persist even in spite of attrition and turnover.

In more typical organizational conflict, people might disagree on one issue, while they agree on another. In organizational feuds, the partners are very consistent in their polarization. They simply cannot work together — on anything.

Organizational feuds are of three main types: interpersonal, inter-professional, and impersonal [structural].

1. Interpersonal feuds — feuds between individuals — can occur at any level within an organization. Rarely are they purely personal. More often they're manifestations of impersonal [structural] feuds, or they at least have an organizational dimension. Characteristics:

- Interpersonal feuds respond to personal intervention
- The feuding partners have few allies
- Interpersonal feuds can exist in isolation

2. Inter-group feuds are feuds between groups that self-identify by occupation or some other type of major identity differences] within the same organization. Examples:

- Inter-family feuds
- The old-timers vs. the new folks
- Labor vs. management

3. In the impersonal/structural feud, enmity is based on organizational affiliation. Think of the structural feud as an analog to sibling rivalry. The feud is more evident when the organizations are similar — two competing product lines, for example, or Corporate HR and Divisional HR, or two churches of the same denomination.

How do feuds originate?

In the midst of an especially intense feud, people sometimes ask themselves "Who started this?" or "How did we get here?" Usually this precipitates yet another argument—each side blaming the other for starting it—but the initiating events almost always seem small in comparison to the mutual assaults that followed in ever-intensifying cascades. In most cases, the initiating events are just sparks for the fire—once the feud takes hold, the initiating events are relatively unimportant and play little role in maintaining the feud.

The initiating event is irrelevant, and attempts to defuse the feud by understanding the initiating event are futile. Each faction believes that the other has harmed it or threatens to harm it. Real or perceived harm provides the energy that enables the parties to engage in further aggressive action. Unless the participants have a clear perception that the other faction is bent on harm, most will simply drop out of the feud.

Why do feuds persist?

Feuds are examples of “strange loops” [Hofstadter, 1989] or “self-sealing loops” [Argyris, 1990], which exist in a system when we unexpectedly find ourselves right back where we started, again and again. In a feud, the levels in question are

the volleys of emotional (and sometimes physical) exchanges that comprise the skirmishes of the feud.

The pattern of an action by one party leading to a response by the other constitutes a strange, or self-sealing, loop. No external support is needed—the feud maintains itself.

A balance of power

Feuds can persist only when there's a balance of power. That balance usually is designed into the organizational structure as a stabilizer, because typically it's necessary for both parties to function harmoniously. Unfortunately, that design stabilizes the feud as well, because neither side is capable of finally vanquishing the other.

One-sided belief systems

All of us have belief systems—beliefs that we use to interpret the world. In a feud, the participants within each faction share beliefs that affect how they interpret the actions and intentions of the other. Because the feud tends to intensify emotions, these beliefs can be irrational, inconsistent and one-sided. Examples:

- *They* place their own interests above the interests of the organization.
- *We* have the moral high ground.
- *We're* better people than *they* are.
- *We're* the offended party, and any response we choose is justifiable.
- *They* consistently and knowingly misrepresent the facts.
- *They* don't care who *they* hurt.
- There's no point in trying to work things out with *them*, because *they* won't honor any agreement.
- *We* will ultimately prevail over *them*, if only *we* can make our case clearly enough.

Since these beliefs can act to insulate the participants from the effects of interventions, designs of interventions intended to end the feud must take these beliefs into account.

Ending feuds

Ending a feud can't be done by one side—or one individual—alone. It takes both parties or an outside force.

If one party tries to withdraw unilaterally, the other party is likely to escalate the attack in the hope of finally finishing them off. Unilateral withdrawal thus intensifies the feud.

A leader cannot decree that a feud is over. A feud cannot be ended with an email or a meeting. The only way a feud ever ends is when all the people involved agree to end it.

In some instances, the one manager who is in a position to resolve a feud intentionally declines to take any action, in the belief that it's best "if they work it out between themselves." This approach rarely works, because it leaves the balance of power—and therefore the feud—in place.

Any successful intervention must break the feud's strange/self-sealing loop. Approaches include:

- Reorganization

A reorganization can assist in ending an impersonal/structural feud. If the change can break the organizational affiliations of the feuders, they're deprived of the clarity of self-image. This is accomplished by mixing the factions structurally, so that former enemies now have to work side-by-side. The thoroughness of the mix determines how thoroughly the former self-images are erased.

Reorganizations are very difficult to implement, especially at first, mostly due to surviving enmities. These enmities can often be mitigated by throwing former neutrals into the mix in the new structure.

- Altering the balance of power

Successfully altering the balance of power will always end a feud, but you might not get the result you want. Since the balance of power ensures that neither faction can dominate the other, each volley in the exchange is guaranteed to leave the other standing. By altering the balance of power, you remove the guarantee. Eventually, one side or the other prevails, and the feud ends.

However, if what you really want is for the two factions to work in harmony, dominance of one faction by the other is undesirable. Therefore, this approach should be used with great caution.

- Altering the belief systems [e.g., “Moccasin” workshops]

Altering the belief systems of the two sides can be an effective method of breaking the strange/self-sealing loops of a feud. Because most people want to see themselves as humane and reasonable, de-humanizing feud opponents makes it much easier to execute acts that harm them.

The goal of “Moccasin” workshops is to unequivocally show the humanity of the parties to each other: as human beings, worthy of respect, doing the best that they know how to do.

These workshops give members of each faction an opportunity to look at the world from the point of view of their feuding partners. Because its goal is achieving a shift in people's perceptions of other people, a moccasin workshop must be carefully planned, tailored to your specific situation, and skillfully executed.

Once the members of each faction experience the feelings of the members of the other, they can no longer dehumanize them so easily, because dehumanization of the other is now seen as dehumanization of the self.

Once a party's belief system is seen to be faulty, the feud's strange loop is broken. Thereafter, its dynamics are different, and the feud might even end.

All of these approaches “work” or “don't work,” depending on hundreds of variables.

The resolution of most conflicts usually proves to be extremely challenging and time-consuming to address. And that's not even referring to the short- and long-term outcomes...

v. Whether or not to “do it yourself”

- When dealing with issues that are posing a conflict, you need five things:

Awareness, skill, time, commitment, and courage

- Warning signs of unhealthy situations:

- Sarcasm—Team members use a sarcastic tone of voice or roll their eyes and elbow their neighbor every time a suggestion or comment is made.
- Argument—Two team members engage in a separate, heated discussion, ignoring the ground rules and moving from debate into personal conflict.
- Domination—A team member jumps into every discussion and monopolizes the floor, preventing other team members from participating.
- Aggression—A team member uses aggressive body language or tone of voice to intimidate or ridicule other members.
- Digression—Team members can’t stay focused on agenda issues and want to discuss other items that are not the focus of the session.
- Put-downs—Team members say “yes, but” to every suggestion that other members put forth.
- Resistance—Team members refuse to participate.

- Be careful with extremely “wounded people” [Bohn]

- Wounded people are vigilant about fairness.
- They may believe that life owes them more than what they’re getting.
- They tend to be extremists about trust.
- They can be cynics and skeptics.
- They have a passionate desire to find out if anything is wrong with a possible solution.
- They have a passionate desire to be heard.
- They crave true recognition.

- They know how to place blame.

- How much time should you spend on this conflict?
 1. How important is the issue to you?
 2. How important is the relationship to you?
 3. What will happen if I don't deal with it?
 4. How will I feel about myself
 - ... if I work to resolve the conflict?
 - ... if I don't?