

## 11. Conflict

### Understanding Key Concept

- Conflict occurs when parties disagree over substantive issues or when emotional antagonisms create friction between them.
- Substantive conflict involves fundamental disagreement over ends or goals to be pursued and the means for their accomplishment.
- Emotional conflict involves interpersonal difficulties that arise over feelings of anger, mistrust, dislike, fear, resentment, and the like.
- Intrapersonal conflict occurs within the individual because of actual or perceived pressures from incompatible goals or expectations.
- Interpersonal conflict occurs between two or more individuals in opposition to each other.
- Intergroup conflict occurs among groups in an organization.
- Interorganizational conflict occurs between organizations.
- Functional conflict results in positive benefits to the group.
- Dysfunctional conflict works to the group's or organization's disadvantage.
- Conflict resolution occurs when the reasons for a conflict are eliminated.
- Avoidance involves pretending a conflict does not really exist.
- Accommodation or smoothing involves playing down differences and finding areas of agreement.
- Compromise occurs when each party gives up something of value to the other.
- Competition seeks victory by force, superior skill, or domination.
- Authoritative command uses formal authority to end conflict.
- Collaboration involves recognition that something is wrong and needs attention through problem solving.
- Problem solving uses information to resolve disputes.

### Conflict

Conflict occurs whenever disagreements exist in a social situation over issues of substance or whenever emotional antagonisms create frictions between individuals or groups. Managers and team leaders can spend considerable time dealing with conflict, including conflicts in which the manager or leader is directly involved as one of the principal actors. In other situations, the manager or leader may act as a mediator, or third party, whose job it is to resolve conflicts between other people. In all cases, a manager and team leader must be comfortable with the interpersonal conflict. This includes being able to recognize situations that have the potential for conflict and to deal with these situations in ways that will best serve the needs of both the organization and the people involved.

### TYPES OF CONFLICT

Conflict as it is experienced in the daily workplace involves at least two basic forms. Substantive conflict is a fundamental disagreement over ends or goals to be pursued and the

means for their accomplishment. A dispute with one's boss over a plan of action to be followed, such as the marketing strategy for a new product, is an example of substantive conflict. When people work together day in and day out, it is only normal that different viewpoints on a variety of substantive workplace issues will arise. At times people will disagree over such things as group and organizational goals, the allocation of resources, the distribution of rewards, policies and procedures, and task assignments. Dealing with such conflicts successfully is an everyday challenge for most managers.

By contrast, emotional conflict involves interpersonal difficulties that arise over feelings of anger, mistrust, dislike, fear, resentment, and the like. This conflict is commonly known as a "clash of personalities." Emotional conflicts can drain the energies of people and distract them from important work priorities. They can emerge from a wide variety of settings and are common among co-workers as well as in superior-subordinate relationships. The latter form of emotional conflict is perhaps the most upsetting organizational conflict for any person to experience. Unfortunately, competitive pressures in today's business environment and the resulting emphasis on downsizing and restructuring have created more situations in which the decisions of a "tough" boss can create emotional conflict.

#### LEVELS OF CONFLICT

When dealing personally with conflicts in the workplace, the relevant question becomes: "How well prepared are you to encounter and deal successfully with conflicts of various types?" People at work may encounter conflict at the intrapersonal level (conflict within the individual), the interpersonal level (individual-to-individual conflict), the intergroup level, or the interorganizational level.

Some conflicts that affect behavior in organizations involve the individual alone. These intrapersonal conflicts often involve actual or perceived pressures from incompatible goals or expectations of the following types: Approach-approach conflict occurs when a person must choose between two positive and equally attractive alternatives. An example is having to choose between a valued promotion in the organization or a desirable new job with another firm. Avoidance-avoidance conflict occurs when a person must choose between two negative and equally unattractive alternatives. An example is being asked either to accept a job transfer to another town in an undesirable location or to have one's employment with an organization terminated. Approach-avoidance conflict occurs when a person must decide to do something that has both positive and negative consequences. An example is being offered a higher paying job whose responsibilities entail unwanted demands on one's personal time.

Interpersonal conflict occurs between two or more individuals who are in opposition to one another. It may be substantive or emotional or both. Two persons debating each other aggressively on the merits of hiring a job applicant is an example of a substantive interpersonal conflict. Two persons continually in disagreement over each other's choice of work attire is an example of an emotional interpersonal conflict.

Intergroup conflict that occurs among members of different teams or groups can also have substantive and/or emotional underpinnings. Intergroup conflict is quite common in organizations, and it can make the coordination and integration of task activities very difficult. The classic example is conflict among functional groups or departments, such as marketing and manufacturing, in organizations. The growing use of cross-functional teams and task forces is one way of trying to minimize such conflicts and promote more creative and efficient operations.

Interorganizational conflict is most commonly thought of in terms of the competition and rivalry that characterizes firms operating in the same markets. A good example is the continuing battle between U.S. businesses and their global rivals. But interorganizational conflict is a much broader issue than that represented by market competition alone. Consider, for example, disagreements between unions and the organizations employing their members; between government regulatory agencies and the organizations subject to their surveillance; between organizations and those who supply them with raw materials.

#### FUNCTIONAL AND DYSFUNCTIONAL CONFLICTS

Conflict in organizations can be upsetting both to the individuals directly involved and to others affected by its occurrence. It can be quite uncomfortable, for example, to work in an environment in which two co-workers are continually hostile toward each other. In OB, however, the two sides to conflict shown in Figure 2.16 are recognized—the functional or constructive side, and the dysfunctional or destructive side.

Functional conflict, alternatively called constructive conflict, results in positive benefits to individuals, the group, or the organization. On the positive side, conflict can bring important problems to the surface so that they can be addressed. It can cause decisions to be considered carefully and perhaps reconsidered to ensure that the right path of action is being followed. It can increase the amount of information used for decision making. And it can offer opportunities for creativity that can improve individual, team, or organizational performance. Indeed, an effective manager is able to stimulate constructive conflict in situations in which satisfaction with the status quo inhibits needed change and development.

Dysfunctional conflict, or destructive conflict, works to the individual's, group's, or organization's disadvantage. It diverts energies, hurts group cohesion, promotes interpersonal hostilities, and overall creates a negative environment for workers. This occurs, for example, when two employees are unable to work together because of interpersonal differences (a destructive emotional conflict) or when the members of a committee fail to act because they cannot agree on group goals (a destructive substantive conflict). Destructive conflicts of these types can decrease work productivity and job satisfaction and contribute to absenteeism and job turnover. Managers must be alert to destructive conflicts and be quick to take action to prevent or eliminate them or at least minimize their disadvantages.

## CULTURE AND CONFLICT

Society today shows many signs of wear and tear in social relationships. We experience difficulties born of racial tensions, homophobia, gender gaps, and more. All trace in some way to tensions among people who are different in some ways from one another. They are also a reminder that culture and cultural differences must be considered for their conflict potential.

Among the popular dimensions of culture discussed in Section 5, for example, substantial differences may be noted in time orientation. When persons from short-term cultures such as the United States try to work with persons from longterm cultures such as Japan, the likelihood of conflict developing is high. The same holds true when individualists work with collectivists and when persons from high-power distance work with those from low-power distance cultures. In each case, individuals who are not able to recognize and respect the impact of culture on behavior may contribute to the emergence of dysfunctional situations. On the other hand, by approaching a cross-cultural work situation with sensitivity and respect, one can find ways to work together without great difficulty and even with the advantages that constructive conflict may offer.

### Managing Conflict

Conflict can be addressed in many ways, but the important goal is to achieve or set the stage for true conflict resolution—a situation in which the underlying reasons for a given destructive conflict are eliminated. The process begins with a good understanding of causes and recognition of the stage to which conflict has developed.

## STAGES OF CONFLICT

Most conflicts develop in stages, as shown in Figure 2.17. Managers should recognize that unresolved prior conflicts help set the stage for future conflicts of the same or related sort.

Rather than try to deny the existence of conflict or settle on a temporary resolution, it is always best to deal with important conflicts so that they are completely resolved. Conflict antecedents establish the conditions from which conflicts are likely to develop. When the antecedent conditions become the basis for substantive or emotional differences between people or groups, the stage of perceived conflict exists. Of course, this perception may be held by only one of the conflicting parties. It is important to distinguish between perceived and felt conflict. When conflict is felt, it is experienced as tension that motivates the person to take action to reduce feelings of discomfort. For conflict to be resolved, all parties should both perceive it and feel the need to do something about it.

When conflict is expressed openly in behavior, it is said to be manifest. A state of manifest conflict may be resolved by removing or correcting its antecedents. conditions occurs; the manifest conflict behaviors are controlled. For example, one or both parties may choose to ignore the conflict in their dealings with one another. Suppression is a superficial and often temporary form of conflict resolution. Indeed, we have already noted that unresolved and suppressed conflict fall into this category. Both may continue to fester and cause future conflicts over similar issues. For the short run, however, they may represent the best a manager can achieve until antecedent conditions can be changed. Unresolved substantive conflicts can result in sustained emotional discomfort and escalate into dysfunctional emotional conflict between individuals. In contrast, truly resolved conflicts may establish conditions that reduce the potential for future conflicts or make it easier to deal with them. Thus, any manager should be sensitive to the influence of conflict aftermath on future conflict episodes.

#### CAUSES OF CONFLICT

The process of dealing successfully with conflict begins with a recognition of several types of conflict situations. Vertical conflict occurs between hierarchical levels. It commonly involves supervisor-subordinate disagreements over resources, goals, deadlines, or performance results. Horizontal conflict occurs between persons or groups at the same hierarchical level. These disputes commonly involve goal incompatibilities, resource scarcities, or purely interpersonal factors. A common variation of horizontal conflict is line-staff conflict. It often involves disagreements over who has authority and control over certain matters such as personnel selection and termination practices.

Also common to work situations are role conflicts that occur when the communication of task expectations proves inadequate or upsetting. This often involves unclear communication of work expectations, excessive expectations in the form of job overloads, insufficient expectations in the form of job underloads, and incompatibilities among expectations from different sources.

Work-flow interdependencies are breeding grounds for conflicts. Disputes and open disagreements may erupt among people and units who are required to cooperate to meet challenging goals. When interdependence is high—that is, when a person or group must rely on task contributions from one or more others to achieve its goals—conflicts often occur. You will notice this, for example, in a fast-food restaurant, when the people serving the food have to wait too long for it to be delivered from the cooks. Conflict also escalates when individuals or groups lack adequate task direction or goals. Domain ambiguities involve misunderstandings over such things as customer jurisdiction or scope of authority. Conflict is likely when individuals or groups are It can also be suppressed. With suppression, no change in antecedent placed in ambiguous situations where it is difficult for them to understand just who is responsible for what.

Actual or perceived resource scarcity can foster destructive competition. When resources are scarce, working relationships are likely to suffer. This is especially true in organizations that are experiencing downsizing or financial difficulties. As cutbacks occur, various individuals or groups try to position themselves to gain or retain maximum shares of the shrinking resource pool. They are also likely to try to resist resource redistribution, or to employ countermeasures to defend their resources from redistribution to others.

Finally, power or value asymmetries in work relationships can create conflict. They exist when interdependent people or groups differ substantially from one another in status and influence or in values. Conflict resulting from asymmetry is prone to occur, for example, when a low-power person needs the help of a high-power person, who does not respond; when people who hold dramatically different values are forced to work together on a task; or when a high-status person is required to interact with and perhaps be dependent on someone of lower status.

#### INDIRECT CONFLICT MANAGEMENT APPROACHES

Indirect conflict management approaches share the common ground of avoiding direct dealings with personalities. They include reduced interdependence, appeals to common goals, hierarchical referral, and alterations in the use of mythology and scripts.

**Reduced Interdependence** When work-flow conflicts exist, managers can adjust the level of interdependency among units or individuals. One simple option is decoupling, or taking action to eliminate or reduce the required contact between conflict parties. In some cases, the units' tasks can be adjusted to reduce the number of required points of coordination. The conflicting units can then be separated from one another, and each can be provided separate access to valued resources. Although decoupling may reduce conflict, it may also result in duplication and a poor

allocation of valued resources.

Buffering is another approach that can be used when the inputs of one group are the outputs of another group. The classic buffering technique is to build an inventory, or buffer, between the two groups so that any output slowdown or excess is absorbed by the inventory and does not directly pressure the target group. Although it reduces conflict, this technique is increasingly out of favor because it increases inventory costs. This consequence is contrary to the elements of “just-in-time” delivery that is now valued in operations management.

Conflict management can be facilitated by assigning people to serve as formal linking pins between groups that are prone to conflict. Persons in linkingpin roles, such as project liaison, are expected to understand the operations, members, needs, and norms of their host group. They are supposed to use this knowledge to help their group work better with other groups in order to accomplish mutual tasks. Though expensive, this technique is often used when different specialized groups, such as engineering and sales, must closely coordinate their efforts on complex and long-term projects.

**Appeals to Common Goals** An appeal to common goals can focus the attention of potentially conflicting parties on one mutually desirable conclusion. By elevating the potential dispute to a common framework wherein the parties recognize their mutual interdependence in achieving common goals, petty disputes can be put in perspective. However, this can be difficult to achieve when prior performance is poor and individuals or groups disagree over how to improve performance. In this negative situation, the manager needs to remember the attributional tendency of individuals to blame poor performance on others or on external conditions. In this case, conflict resolution begins by making sure that the parties take personal responsibility for improving the situation.

**Hierarchical Referral** Hierarchical referral makes use of the chain of command for conflict resolution. Here, problems are simply referred up the hierarchy for more senior managers to reconcile. Whereas hierarchical referral can be definitive in a given case, it also has limitations. If conflict is severe and recurring, the continual use of hierarchical referral may not result in true conflict resolution. Managers removed from day-to-day affairs may fail to diagnose the real causes of a conflict, and conflict resolution may be superficial. Busy managers may tend to consider most conflicts as results of poor interpersonal relations and may act quickly to replace a person with a perceived “personality” problem.

**Altering Scripts and Myths** In some situations, conflict is superficially managed by scripts, or

behavioral routines that become part of the organization's culture. The scripts become rituals that allow the conflicting parties to vent their frustrations and to recognize that they are mutually dependent on one another via the larger corporation. An example is a monthly meeting of "department heads," held presumably for purposes of coordination and problem solving but that actually becomes just a polite forum for superficial agreement. Managers in such cases know their scripts and accept the difficulty of truly resolving any major conflicts. By sticking with the script, expressing only low-key disagreement and then quickly acting as if everything has been resolved, for instance, the managers publicly act as if problems are being addressed. Such scripts can be altered to allow and encourage active confrontation of issues and disagreements.

## DIRECT CONFLICT

### MANAGEMENT APPROACHES

Figure 2.18 describes the five approaches to conflict management from the perspective of their relative emphasis on cooperativeness and assertiveness in the relationship. Consultants and academics generally agree that true conflict resolution can occur only when the underlying substantive and emotional reasons for the conflict are identified and dealt with through a solution that allows all conflicting parties to "win." (See *The Effective Manager* 2.8.) This important issue of "Who wins?" can be addressed from the perspective of each conflicting party.

**Lose-Lose Conflict** Lose-lose conflict occurs when nobody really gets what he or she wants. The underlying reasons for the conflict remain unaffected and a similar conflict is likely to occur in the future. Lose-lose conflicts often result when there is little or no assertiveness and conflict management takes these forms. Avoidance is an extreme form of inattention; everyone simply pretends that the conflict does not really exist and hopes that it will go away. Accommodation, or smoothing as it is sometimes called, involves playing down differences among the conflicting parties and highlighting similarities and areas of agreement. This peaceful coexistence ignores the real essence of a given conflict and often creates frustration and resentment. Compromise occurs when each party gives up something of value to the other. As a result of no one getting its full desires, the antecedent conditions for future conflicts are established.

**Win-Lose Conflict** In win-lose conflict, one party achieves its desires at the expense and to the exclusion of the other party's desires. This is a high-assertiveness and low-cooperativeness situation. It may result from outright competition in which a victory is achieved through force, superior skill, or domination by one party. It may also occur as a result of authoritative command, whereby a formal authority simply dictates a solution and specifies what is gained and what is lost by whom. Win-lose strategies fail to address the root causes of the conflict and tend to suppress the desires of at least one of the conflicting parties. As a result, future conflicts

over the same issues are likely to occur.

**Win-Win Conflict** Win-win conflict is achieved by a blend of both high cooperativeness and high assertiveness.<sup>168</sup> Collaboration or problem solving involves a recognition by all conflicting parties that something is wrong and needs attention. It stresses gathering and evaluating information in solving disputes and making choices. Win-win conditions eliminate the reasons for continuing or resurrecting the conflict since nothing has been avoided or suppressed. All relevant issues are raised and openly discussed. The ultimate test for a win-win solution is whether or not the conflicting parties see that the solution (1) achieves each other's goals, (2) is acceptable to both parties, and (3) establishes a process whereby all parties involved see a responsibility to be open and honest about facts and feelings. When success is achieved, true conflict resolution has occurred.

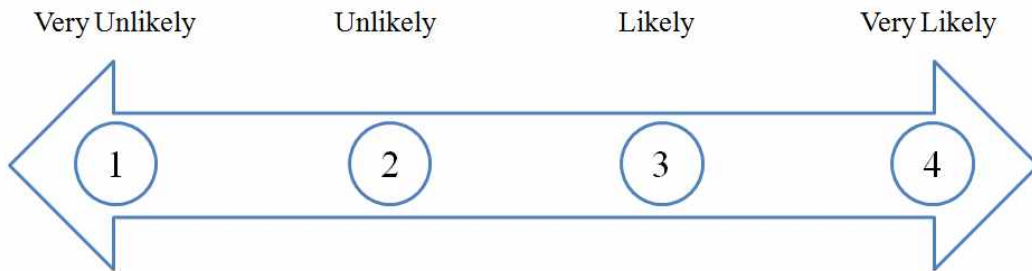
Although collaboration and problem solving are generally favored, one limitation is the time and energy it requires. It is also important to realize that both parties to the conflict need to be assertive and cooperative in order to develop a win-win joint solution. Finally, collaboration and problem solving may not be feasible if the firm's dominant culture does not place a value on cooperation.



Self Assessment on 'Conflict Management Style'<sup>1)</sup>

Instructions

Think of how you behave in conflict situations in which your wishes differ from those of one or more persons. In the space to the left of each statement below, write the number from the following scale that indicates how likely you are to respond that way in a conflict situation.



- \_\_\_ 1. I am usually firm in pursuing my goals.
- \_\_\_ 2. I try to win my position.
- \_\_\_ 3. I give up some points in exchange for others.
- \_\_\_ 4. I feel that differences are not always worth worrying about.
- \_\_\_ 5. I try to find a position that is intermediate between the other person' and mine.
- \_\_\_ 6. In approaching negotiations, I try to be considerate of the other person' wishes.
- \_\_\_ 7. I try to show the logic and benefits of my positions.
- \_\_\_ 8. I always lean toward a direct discussion of the problem.
- \_\_\_ 9. I try to find a fair combination of gains and losses for both of us.
- \_\_\_ 10. I attempt to work through our differences immediately.
- \_\_\_ 11. I try to avoid creating unpleasantness for myself.
- \_\_\_ 12. I try to soothe the other person' feelings and preserve our relationships.
- \_\_\_ 13. I attempt to get all concerns and issues immediately out in the open.
- \_\_\_ 14. I sometimes avoid taking positions that would create controversy.
- \_\_\_ 15. I try not to hurt others' feelings.

Scoring

Total your scores for items 1, 2, 7; enter that score here [Competing = \_\_\_\_]. Total your scores for items 8, 10, 13; enter that score here [Collaborating = \_\_\_\_]. Total your scores 1 = very unlikely 2 = unlikely 3 = likely 4 = very likely for items 3, 5, 9; enter that score here [Compromising = \_\_\_\_]. Total your scores for items 4, 11, 14; enter that score here. [Avoiding = \_\_\_\_]. Total your scores for items 6, 12, 15; enter that score here [Accommodating = \_\_\_\_].

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1) *Source:* Adapted from Thomas-Kilmann, *Conflict Mode Instrument*, Copyright © 1974, Xicom, Inc., Tuxedo, NY 10987.

### Interpretation

Each of the scores above corresponds to one of the conflict management styles. Research indicates that each style has a role to play in management but that the best overall conflict management approach is collaboration; only it can lead to problem solving and true conflict resolution. You should consider any patterns that may be evident in your scores and think about how to best handle conflict situations in which you become involved.