

Conflict Dynamics

Conflict is a state that occurs when two or more parties believe that they have incompatible objectives. Life is full of annoyances, disagreements, differences of opinion and divergent interpretations, but only a small fraction of these grow into disputes or ongoing conflict. Disputes emerge when disagreements, differences, annoyances, competition or inequities threaten something important.

Many disputes seem trivial or irrational to others, but for some reason a particular situation has touched individuals in deep ways. Individuals may act in an exaggerated manner or in ways they would never act otherwise - heroically, foolishly, meanly - when they feel a powerful threat to something important to them.

Conflict Elements. There are two essential elements:

- 1) Parties' perceptions that they are in conflict and the feelings that go along with being in conflict.
- 2) Objective differences the parties' have in the outcomes they are seeking.

Conflict Triangle. Every conflict has three sides:

- 1) **People.** Every conflict involves a history of relationships and personalities. It is impacted by the values, emotions, behaviors, abilities, and relationships of the people involved in the conflict.
- 2) **Process.** Every conflict has a pattern of interaction including the way it intensifies, eases or spreads. The way those involved in the conflict communicate issues and feelings, their roles, and how they make decisions all influence the conflict. Additionally, the processes people use to try to resolve conflict can impact this pattern of interaction.
- 3) **Problem.** Every conflict has its content – the issues and interests that are the “reason” for the dispute. This includes the facts, positions, issues, perceptions, needs, interests, and consequences of events as seen by each individual involved in the conflict.

The conflict triangle gives mediators a basic framework for assessing the conflict. Any lasting resolution must recognize and address all three sides for the conflict.

Conflict Styles

There are two dimensions to conflict management:

- 1) **Assertiveness:** extent to which one seeks to satisfy own concerns and promote own needs and interests.
- 2) **Cooperativeness:** degree to which one focuses on satisfying others' concerns, needs, and interests.

There are five distinct styles of conflict management:

Competition

Accommodation

Avoidance

Compromise

Collaboration

Each style of conflict management is useful in certain situations. The effectiveness of each style depends on requirements of the specific conflict situation. Most people are capable of using all five modes; however, most people tend to rely on certain modes more heavily.

- 1) **COMPETITION.** Competition is trying to win or make the other person give in to your position. A competitive person defends his/her position or pursues his/her goals without regard for the needs of the other person. The competitive style assumes that in order for one person to win the other person must lose.

Competitive individuals are high on assertiveness and low on cooperation. They are able to stand up for their rights in defending positions they believe are correct or in simply trying to "win". This power-oriented mode can be useful when quick and decisive action is important, or where unpopular courses of action need to be implemented. A drawback to the competitive style is that others may be unwilling to disagree with or try to influence a competitive individual, thus closing him/her off from other perspectives and the opportunity to learn.

- 2) **ACCOMMODATION.** Accommodation is putting aside your own needs and concerns in order to satisfy the needs of the other person.

Accommodators are high on cooperation and low on assertiveness. They neglect their own needs to satisfy others. Accommodators may be acting out of selfless generosity or yielding to another's point of view. Accommodation can be a good strategy when the issue is more important to the other person or preserving harmony is important. However, accommodation can also lead to the accommodator being taken advantage of by the other person.

- 3) **AVOIDANCE.** Avoidance is knowing there is a conflict but choosing not to deal with it. An avoider walks away from the problem and may avoid the person with whom he or she is having the conflict.

Avoiders score low on both cooperation and assertiveness. Avoidance may be beneficial when an issue is trivial or when a party perceives that there is no chance of satisfying his/her concerns. Additionally, avoidance may be a helpful strategy when there is a significant risk of damage if the conflict is confronted or when one wants to give people and tension time to cool.

- 4) **COMPROMISE.** Compromise is giving up something in order to get something. Compromise is an attempt to seek middle ground.

Compromise is somewhere between assertiveness and cooperation. The compromiser's objective is to find an expedient solution that partially satisfies both parties. Compromising individuals seek the middle ground, where each side gives a little and gets a little.

Compromise is a useful strategy to arrive at an expedient solution under time pressure, when issues are moderately important or when the parties are locked into mutually exclusive positions. However, with this approach, one can lose sight of larger issues which underlie conflicts. An overemphasis on bargaining and trade-offs might undermine interpersonal trust and deflect attention away from the merits of each person's position.

- 5) **COLLABORATION.** Collaboration is working together to find a solution that satisfies the needs of both people and is acceptable to both people. Collaboration is a “win-win” problem solving approach that assumes that both people can get their needs met and that one party does not have to win at the expense of the other.

A collaborative style is high on both assertiveness and cooperativeness. Collaboration is a mutual problem solving process that seeks to resolve conflict by reaching a solution that will fully satisfy the concerns and interests of all parties. Collaboration is a good technique when important relationships are at stake, the issues in dispute are significant to both people, and they can make a commitment to spend the time required for this problem-solving process. Drawbacks of collaboration include the time and energy needed for the collaboration. Trivial problems may not merit the time and effort for collaboration.

Adapted from:

Thomas, Kenneth W. and Kilmann, Ralph H. “Thomas-Killman Conflict Mode Instrument”, CPP, Inc. (1974).

Conflict Effects

Common experiences of individuals in conflict:

Heightened Weakness

- Confusion about conflict and one's role in it
- Diminished access to good decision making skills
- Sense of being threatened and need to defend oneself
- Hopelessness and despair may dominate thinking
- Frustration and anger may masquerade as strength

Heightened Self-Absorption

- Resistance to listening to others
- Resistance to appreciate the viewpoint of others
- Singular focus on own needs and viewpoint
- Assumption that others' motives are negative
- Suspicion and mistrust of others

Characteristics of conflict interaction:

- Lack of communication
- Increased movement between disempowerment and empowerment
- Increased movement between self-absorption and connection
- Conflict escalation
- Involvement or support of others sought
- External decisions or solutions sought
- Distorted or dramatic view of negative consequences for others seems justified

Bush, Robert A. Baruch and Folger, Joseph P. *The Promise of Mediation: Responding to Conflict through Empowerment and Recognition*, 1994.

Conflict Potential

The belief that conflict is an inevitable part of life and the realization that it is our reaction or response to it that makes a conflict situation constructive or destructive are keys to dealing with conflict. Disputes are not pre-destined to follow a negative course. Whether or not this happens depends on the parties' ability to communicate, lay aside distrust, and work together to problem solve. They often need a mediator's help to do these things.

Conflict can:

- Be valuable
- Be productive
- Lead to growth
- Excite to action
- Increase group cohesion
- Lead to new information
- Be a measure of strength, power
- Highlight importance of issues, ideas, people

Experiences of individuals:

Movement from Weakness to Strength

- Greater clarity about aspects of the conflict
- Awareness of resources at one's disposal
- Renewed confidence in one's own problem solving abilities
- Ability to make decisions

Movement from Self-Absorption or Openness

- Ability to hear other viewpoints
- Greater openness to other's perspectives
- Greater understanding and appreciation of motives for other's behavior

Changes in the quality of interaction:

- Improved communication
- Mutual respect
- Teamwork
- Relational healing
- "Upstream effects"

Bush, Robert A. Baruch and Folger, Joseph P. (1994) The Promise of Mediation: Responding to Conflict through Empowerment and Recognition.

Bingham, Lisa B. (1997) "Mediating Employment Disputes: Perceptions of REDRESS at the United States Postal Service," *Review of Public Personnel Administration.*