

8.7: What Is Conflict?

Learning Objectives

1. Define conflict
2. Identify five subjects of conflict in groups
3. Acknowledge four major dangers of group conflict

My athletes are always willing to accept my advice as long as it doesn't conflict with their views. - Lou Holtz (college and professional football coach)

Most people probably regard conflict as something to avoid, or at least not something we go looking for. Still, we'd all agree that it's a familiar, perennial, and powerful part of human interaction. For these reasons, we need to know what it is, how to identify it, what it may deal with, and what damage it may cause if it isn't handled wisely.

Definitions of Conflict

Hocker & Wilmot (Hocker, J.L., & Wilmot, W.W. (2001). *Interpersonal conflict* (6th ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill) defined conflict as an expressed struggle between interdependent parties over goals which they perceive as incompatible or resources which they perceive to be insufficient. Let's examine the ingredients in their definition.

First of all, conflict must be expressed. If two members of a group dislike each other or disagree with each other's viewpoints but never show those sentiments, there's no conflict.

Second, conflict takes place between or among parties who are interdependent—that is, who need each other to accomplish something. If they can get what they want without each other, they may differ in how they do so, but they won't come into conflict.

Finally, conflict involves clashes over what people want or over the means for them to achieve it. Party A wants X, whereas party B wants Y. If they either can't both have what they want at all, or they can't each have what they want to the degree that they would prefer to, conflict will arise.

When it came to Lou Holtz and the players on his football teams, it's obvious that Holtz's views of who should take the field and what plays should be run were not always the same as his players'. In a football game it's possible to attempt a pass or to execute a run, for instance, but not both on the same play. In this kind of situation, conflict is inevitable and is probably going to be constant.

Consider the case, likewise, of a small group assigned to complete a project in a biology class. One student in the group, Robin, may be a political science major with a new baby at home to attend to. Robin may be taking the course as an elective and want to devote as little time as possible to the project so as to be able to spend family time. Another member of the group, Terry, may be on the pre-med track and feel strong curiosity about the topic of the presentation. If Terry is determined to create a product which earns a high grade and helps get the professor's recommendation for a summer research internship, then Robin and Terry will experience conflict over how, when, or how hard to work on their project.



Figure 8.7.1: Source: www.flickr.com/photos/dave-goodman/208072430/

As any conflict takes shape, each person brings a combination of perceptions, emotions, and behavior to bear on it. This combination will evolve and change with time, depending on how people interact with each other and with the forces in their environment.

We can't stop perceiving things in our surroundings. How we perceive others—whether positively or negatively—influences both how we feel about them and how we behave toward them, and *vice versa*. The perceptions we experience of ourselves and of others affect our emotional states, which in turn create new perceptions in those around us.

At the beginning of the biology course we just mentioned, Robin may perceive Terry as intelligent and as someone who can pull most of the weight in their class project. Robin may compliment and praise Terry at this point, and Terry may glow with the satisfaction of being appreciated. Their mutual perceptions are then positive, and their emotional state is favorable.

When the first deadline in the project comes along and the portion of the group's work assigned to Robin turns out to be mediocre, however, things will probably change. Terry is apt to start perceiving Robin as a laggard and as a threat to Terry's own ambitions for the class and beyond. Robin, meanwhile, may feel angry and resist Terry's pressure to put more energy into the remainder of their assigned work.

Subjects of Conflict

Beyond the setting of the biology class we've described, group conflicts may deal with many topics, needs, and elements. Marilyn Kelly, (Kelly, M.S. (2006). *Communication @ work: Ethical, effective, and expressive communication in the workplace*. Boston: Pearson) identified the following five subjects of conflict:

First, there are conflicts of substance. These conflicts, which relate to questions about what choices to make in a given situation, rest on differing views of the facts. If Terry thinks the biology assignment requires an annotated bibliography but Robin believes a simple list of readings will suffice, they're in a conflict of substance. Another term for this kind of conflict is "intrinsic conflict."

Conflicts of value are those in which various parties either hold totally different values or rank the same values in a significantly different order. The famous sociologist Milton Rokeach (Rokeach, M. (1979). *Understanding human values: Individual and societal*. New York: The Free Press), for instance, found that freedom and equality constitute values in the four major political systems of the past 100 years—communism, fascism, socialism, and capitalism. What differentiated the systems, however, was the degree to which proponents of each system ranked those two key values. According to Rokeach's analysis, socialism holds both values highly; fascism holds them in low regard; communism values equality over freedom, and capitalism values freedom over equality. As we all know, conflict among proponents of these four political systems preoccupied people and governments for the better part of the twentieth century.

Conflicts of process arise when people differ over how to reach goals or pursue values which they share. How closely should they stick to rules and timelines, for instance, and when should they let their hair down and simply brainstorm new ideas? What about when multiple topics and challenges are intertwined; how and when should the group deal with each one? Another term for these disputes is "task conflicts."

Conflicts of misperceived differences come up when people interpret each other's actions or emotions erroneously. You can probably think of several times in your life when you first thought you disagreed with other people but later found out that you'd just misunderstood something they said and that you actually shared a perspective with them. Or perhaps you attributed a different motive to them than what really underlay their actions. One misconception about conflict, however, is that it always arises from misunderstandings. This isn't the case, however. Robert Doolittle, (Doolittle, R.J. (1976). *Orientations to communication and conflict*. Chicago: Science Research Associates) noted that "some of the most serious conflicts occur among individuals and groups who understand each other very well but who strongly disagree."

The first four kinds of conflict may interact with each other over time, either reinforcing or weakening each other's impact. They may also ebb and flow according to the topics and conditions a group confronts. Even if they're dealt with well, however, further emotional and personal kinds of conflict can occur in a group. Relationship conflicts, also known as personality clashes, often involve people's egos and sense of self-worth. Relationship conflicts tend to be particularly difficult to cope with, since they frequently aren't admitted for what they are. Many times, they arise in a struggle for superiority or status.

Dangers of Conflict

As we'll see later in this chapter, conflict is a normal component of group interaction and can actually be beneficial if it is identified accurately and controlled properly. It can also be dangerous, however, in several major ways. Galanes & Adams (Galanes, G., & Adams, K. (2013). *Effective group discussion: Theory and practice*. New York: McGraw-Hill) identified three such ways.

The first danger is that individual group members may feel bad. Even when everyone's intentions are good and they intend to be constructively critical, people who receive negative comments about their ideas or behavior may take those comments personally. If the people feel demeaned or mistreated, their level of trust in other members will probably dwindle.

The second danger is an outgrowth of the first. It is that the cohesiveness of the group can be diminished if its members have to nurse hurt feelings that have arisen through conflict. At the very least, someone who has to wonder whether he or she has the respect of someone else in the group may spend time mulling that question which could otherwise be used to contribute to the group's work.

The third danger is that conflict can actually split a group apart. Although inertia can sustain a group for long periods of time if no threats or disruptions occur, intense conflict can cause members to decide to invest their energy somewhere else. Relationship conflicts, in particular, may lead to all kinds of unhelpful behavior: rumor-mongering; power plays; backing out on promises; playing favorites; ignoring problems or appeals for help; insulting others; innuendo; backstabbing; or dismissing suggestions without considering them seriously. You're probably aware of at least a few groups and organizations whose origins were encouraging but which eventually disintegrated because of internal conflict.

A fourth danger is that conflict can deteriorate into physical violence. Some people in the heat of a conflict may forget this saying, which has been attributed to Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.: "The right to swing my fist ends where the other man's nose begins."

In 1997, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health. (1997). Violence in the workplace. Retrieved from www.cdc.gov/niosh/violfs.html) reported that more than one million workplace assaults occurred in the United States annually. More recent statistics from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (Occupational Safety and Health Administration. (2012). Workplace violence. Retrieved from www.osha.gov/SLTC/workplaceviolence/) suggest that twice that many workers may be subject to violence each year; that 506 workplace homicides were committed in 2010; and that homicide is the leading cause of death for women in American workplaces.

Key Takeaway

Conflict, which is a struggle over goals or resources, may take many forms and lead to several kinds of harm if it is not skillfully dealt with.

Exercise 8.7.1

1. Find news online of a conflict that erupted into violence. What factors in the situation do you feel contributed to that outcome?
2. Tell a fellow student about a values conflict you've experienced in a group. Describe how you concluded that the conflict dealt with values. Did the group make the same determination at the time?

3. Identify a personality clash you believe you have observed in a group. Write 4-6 pieces of advice you think might have helped each party to that conflict.
4. If a conflict has been brought about by a combination of incompatible goals and insufficient resources, what do you believe will happen if one of the two causes is eliminated? Give an example that substantiates your viewpoint.

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