

8.12: Effective Conflict Management Strategies

Learning Objectives

1. List four preventive steps that a group and its members may take to lessen the likelihood of experiencing damaging conflict
2. Identify measures related to space and time that a group may employ to mediate against potentially destructive conflict
3. Describe steps which members of a group may take to manage conflict when it arises
4. Explain the “SLACK” method of managing conflict

I've led a school whose faculty and students examine and discuss and debate every aspect of our law and legal system. And what I've learned most is that no one has a monopoly on truth or wisdom. I've learned that we make progress by listening to each other, across every apparent political or ideological divide. - Elena Kagan

In calm water, every ship has a good captain. - Swedish Proverb

To be peaceable is, by definition, to be peaceable in time of conflict. - Progressive magazine

If group members communicate effectively and show sensitivity to each other's needs and styles, they can often prevent unproductive and destructive conflict from developing. Nevertheless, they should also be prepared to respond in situations when conflict does crop up.

Before considering some strategies for dealing with conflicts, it's worth pointing out that the title of this section refers to “management” of conflict rather than to “resolution.” The reason for this choice of terminology is that not all conflict needs to be—or can be—resolved. Still, most conflict needs to be managed to keep it from side-tracking, slowing down, weakening, or eventually destroying a group.

First Things First

We've all heard that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Managing conflict is easiest if we've acquired some tools to prevent it from getting out of hand. One way to gain such tools is to undergo some actual formal training in conflict management. A Google search of educational sites related to “conflict management courses” yields several thousand results from around the United States and elsewhere, including numerous certificate and degree programs at the undergraduate and graduate level. Commercial entities offer hundreds more opportunities for professional development in this realm.

A second, more specific preventive measure is for members of a group to periodically review and reaffirm their commitment to the norms, policies, and procedures they've set for themselves. In more formal groups, it's a good idea to assign one member to look over the bylaws or constitution every year to see if anything needs to be changed, clarified, or removed in light of altered circumstances. The danger in not paying attention to such details is represented in the story, told by Robert Townsend, (Townsend, Robert (1970). *Up the organization*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf), of a British civil service job created in 1803 which called for a man to stand on the Cliffs of Dover with a spyglass. The man's role was to ring a bell if he saw Napoleon coming. The job was not abolished until 1945.

A third measure which groups can take to lessen the possibility that damaging conflict will take place within them is to discuss and distinguish between detrimental and beneficial conflict—between that which promotes improvement and that which obstructs progress. The initial “forming” stage of a group, when people are apt to act tentative and be on their best behavior, is probably the best time to set aside some group time to let members share their views, experiences, and expectations with regard to “bad” and “good” conflict. It may be a good idea to ask members of the group to cite specific examples of conflict which they would accept or endorse, and also examples of conflict which they would hope to avoid.

A fourth preventive measure is for the group to explicitly remind its members that “deviates” are to be appreciated and respected for the diverse perspectives they can share and the unconventional opinions they may hold. This kind of statement may give creative members the impression that they have intellectual “free space” for generating and sharing ideas later in the evolution of the group.

Logistical Measures

Proponents of feng shui believe that configurations of furniture affect people's moods and behavior. Employees at the National Observatory in Washington, DC, maintain an atomic clock that keeps precise universal time. You don't need to belong to either of these groups to believe that how a group uses space and time can affect the level and nature of conflict it will experience.

With respect to proxemics, for instance, research has demonstrated that conflict between people who disagree with each other is more likely to flare up if they sit directly across from each other than if they are seated side by side. (Gordon, J., Mondy, R. W., Sharplin, A., & Premeaux, S. R. (1990). *Management and organizational behavior*. New York: Simon & Schuster, p. 540). Why not, then, purposefully plan where people are going to sit and the angles from which they'll see each other?

Decisions about when and for how long groups will gather can also affect their level of conflict. Research into human beings' circadian rhythm—the 24-hour cycle of energy highs and lows—shows that 3 a.m. and 3 p.m. are the two lowest-energy times (www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2004/10/17/night-shift.html). Depending on whether group members clash more or less when their energy level is low, it, therefore, may or may not be wise to meet at three o'clock in the afternoon.

Whenever people in a group get together, it's natural that the mood and outlook they bring with them will be influenced in part by what's happened to them earlier that day. For any individual, a touchy discussion, a disappointment, or an embarrassing episode might precede the group's interactions. Unfortunate events like these—as well as other powerful experiences, whether positive or not—may consciously or unconsciously color the demeanor of group members at the start of their interaction.

Another time-related conflict management strategy, thus, is to begin a discussion with a “time out” for people to rest and loosen up. We know of college instructors who initiate each of their class sessions with two minutes of silence for this same purpose.

Once Conflict Occurs...

Numerous authorities have offered suggestions on how to manage conflict once it reaches a level where it should not or cannot be allowed to dissipate on its own. Hartley & Dawson, first of all, (Hartley, P., & Dawson, M. (2010). *Success in groupwork*. New York: St. Martin's Press) suggested taking the following steps:

1. Make sure the lines of communication are open. If they aren't, open them.
2. Define the issues. Don't allow a nebulous sense of overpowering disagreement to develop. Be specific about what the conflict pertains to.
3. Focus on the task, rather than on personalities. Discourage or deflect comments that question a group member's motives or personal qualities.
4. Proceed according to your established ground rules, policies, procedures, and norms. After all, you established these components of your group's identity precisely to deal with difficult circumstances.

In addition to following rules and procedures peculiar to its own history, a group that's experiencing conflict should strive to maintain civility (Meyer, J.R. Effect of verbal aggressiveness on the perceived importance of secondary goals in messages. *Communication Studies*, 55, 168–184) and follow basic etiquette. As Georges Clemenceau wrote, “Etiquette is nothing but hot air, but that is what our automobiles ride on, and look how it smoothes out the bumps.”

Malcolm Gladwell's popular book, *The Tipping Point*, describes how New York City's subway system was revitalized by David Gunn and William Bratton in the 1980s and 90s (Gladwell, M. (2000). *The tipping point: How little things can make a big difference*. New York: Little, Brown and Company). Together, Gunn and Bratton launched a campaign to eliminate vandalism, including graffiti on the sides of train cars, and to prosecute “fare-beaters.” At the start of the campaign, doubters complained that more serious crime in the subways and streets needed to be attacked first. Gunn and Bratton insisted, however, that setting a broad example of civility would ultimately create an atmosphere in which potential criminals would be less likely to engage in serious criminal acts. After many years of relentlessly enforcing basic laws mandating public decency, not only did graffiti nearly disappear entirely from the subway system, but overall crime in the New York metropolitan area declined substantially.

Hopefully, you will never witness vandalism, much less felonious behavior, in a small group. Malicious verbal interchanges, nevertheless, can poison the atmosphere among people and should be prevented if at all possible. As an old Japanese saying puts it, “The one who raises his voice first loses the argument.” It doesn't hurt to calmly and quietly ask that discussion of particularly contentious topics be postponed if comments seem to be in danger of overwhelming the group with negativity.



Figure 8.12.1: Source: www.flickr.com/photos/joeshlabotnik/842977816/

In addition to reminding people that they should exercise basic politeness, it may be wise at times for someone in the group to ask for a recess in a discussion. Calvin Coolidge said, “I have never been hurt by anything I didn’t say,” and it may be a good idea in irate moments to silence people briefly to prevent what Adler and Rodman, (Adler, R.B., & Rodman, G. (2009). *Understanding human communication* (10th ed.). New York: Oxford University Press) referred to as an “escalatory spiral” of hurtful conversation.

If the tone of a group discussion permits thoughtful reflection, it can be helpful to separate task and relationship goals and deal with conflict over each kind separately. (Fisher, R., & Brown, S. (1988). *Getting Together: Building a relationship that gets to yes*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin). Using indirect communication, rather than confronting another group member head-on, may also defuse extreme emotions and preserve other people’s faces.

Here are further techniques for managing conflict in group interactions:

1. “Test the waters” for new ideas without making it seem that you’re so attached to them that you’ll fight to impose them on others.
2. If an ego clash erupts, see if you can identify something that the disagreeing individuals *can* agree on. Perhaps this will be a superordinate goal. It could also be a common opposing force, since the idea that “my enemy’s enemy is my friend” can serve to bind people together.
3. Employ active listening. Strive to fully understand other people’s viewpoints before stating your own.
4. If people’s comments meander to topics that aren’t germane, steer the discussion back to the key issues under discussion.
5. Frame the situation as a problem to be solved, rather than as a struggle which must be won.
6. Treat everyone as partners on a common quest. Invite continued frank interchanges and assure group members that they may speak out without fear of reprisal.
7. Consider carefully how important it is for you to prevail in a particular conflict or even just to express your views. Ask yourself whether the potential negative consequences of your action will be worth it.
8. Unless a disagreement is over an essential point, consider whether it might be best to “agree to disagree” and move on.



Figure 8.12.2: Source: www.flickr.com/photos/buddawiggi/5987710858/

“Going with the Flow”

As we’ve seen, there is no shortage of specific strategies and techniques for people to choose from when conflict occurs in a group. In fact, it may be overwhelming to try to decide which strategies and techniques to use, at which times and with which people, under which circumstances. Randy Fujishin, a therapist and writer from California, proposed an attitude that might help people deal both with conflict itself and with the feelings of stress it often engenders. He suggested that we regard conflict as neither a call to battle nor a warning to dissolve or disband a group. Instead, Fujishin proposed that people regard conflict as “an invitation to listen, learn, explore, and grow (Fujishin, R. (1998). *Gifts from the heart: 10 communication skills for developing more loving relationships*. San Francisco: Acada Books).” His advice when conflict takes place is this: “Instead of tensing, relax. Instead of stiffening, bend. Instead of arguing, listen. Instead of pushing or running away, get closer. Flow with the disagreement, situation, or individual for a period to discover where it may lead.”

Fujishin also developed what he called the “SLACK” method of managing conflict. Although he intended it to be brought to bear primarily on disputes in one-on-one relationships, its components may apply also in group situations. “SLACK” is an acronym standing for “sit, listen, ask, compromise, and kiss.” Major emphasis in this method is placed on being receptive to what other parties in a conflict have to say, as well as to their emotional states. Fujishin really does suggest kissing or hugging as the final step in this method, but of course many groups will choose instead to celebrate the achievement of post-conflict reconciliation and progress through words.

Perhaps the central message we can derive from Fujishin’s writings on this topic is that, although we should respond to conflict earnestly, we should take a long view and avoid losing our composure in the process of managing it. Even at moments of extreme tension, we can remind ourselves of an ancient saying attributed first to Persian mystics and later cited by such notable figures as Abraham Lincoln: “This too shall pass.”(Taylor, A. (1968). “This Too Will Pass (Jason 910Q)”. In F. Harkort, K.C. Peeters, & R. Wildhaber. *Volksüberlieferung: Festschrift für Kurt Ranke* (pp. 345–350). Göttingen, German: Schwartz).

Key Takeaway

Conflict can be managed by implementing a combination of preventive, logistical, and procedural actions, as well as by maintaining composure and perspective.

Exercise 8.12.1

1. What proportion of conflicts within small groups do you feel can actually be resolved rather than merely managed? Provide a rationale and example(s) for your answer.
2. Think about a conflict that you recently observed or took part in. What elements of its timing, location, or physical surroundings do you think contributed to its nature or severity? Which of those elements, if any, do you think someone might have been able to change to lessen the intensity of the conflict?
3. Labor negotiations sometimes include a mandated “cooling-off period.” Describe a conflict situation you’ve witnessed which you believe might have turned out better had such a cooling-off period been incorporated into it. Describe areas of conflict in your life, at school or elsewhere, in which you feel it would be helpful to make use of such a technique?

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