

8.3: Causes of Conflict in Organizations

How does conflict arise in organizations?

Here we will examine two aspects of the conflict process. First, several factors that have been found to contribute to conflict will be identified. After this, a model of conflict processes in organizations will be reviewed.

Why Organizations Have So Much Conflict

A number of factors are known to facilitate organizational conflict under certain circumstances. In summarizing the literature, Robert Miles points to several specific examples. These are as follows:

Task Interdependencies. The first antecedent can be found in the nature of **task interdependencies**. In essence, the greater the extent of task interdependence among individuals or groups (that is, the more they have to work together or collaborate to accomplish a goal), the greater the likelihood of conflict if different expectations or goals exist among entities, in part because the interdependence makes avoiding the conflict more difficult. This occurs in part because high task interdependency heightens the intensity of relationships. Hence, a small disagreement can very quickly get blown up into a major issue.

Status Inconsistencies. A second factor is **status inconsistencies** among the parties involved. For example, managers in many organizations have the prerogative to take personal time off during workdays to run errands, and so forth, whereas nonmanagerial personnel do not. Consider the effects this can have on the nonmanagers' view of organizational policies and fairness.

Jurisdictional Ambiguities. Conflict can also emerge from **jurisdictional ambiguities**—situations where it is unclear exactly where responsibility for something lies. For example, many organizations use an employee selection procedure in which applicants are evaluated both by the personnel department and by the department in which the applicant would actually work. Because both departments are involved in the hiring process, what happens when one department wants to hire an individual, but the other department does not?

Communication Problems. Suffice it to say that the various *communication problems* or ambiguities in the communication process can facilitate conflict. When one person misunderstands a message or when information is withheld, the person often responds with frustration and anger.

Dependence on Common Resource Pool. Another previously discussed factor that contributes to conflict is *dependence on common resource pools*. Whenever several departments must compete for scarce resources, conflict is almost inevitable. When resources are limited, a zero-sum game exists in which someone wins and, invariably, someone loses.

Lack of Common Performance Standards. Differences in performance criteria and reward systems provide more potential for organizational conflict. This often occurs because of a *lack of common performance standards* among differing groups within the same organization. For example, production personnel are often rewarded for their efficiency, and this efficiency is facilitated by the long-term production of a few products. Sales departments, on the other hand, are rewarded for their short-term response to market changes—often at the expense of long-term production efficiency. In such situations, conflict arises as each unit attempts to meet its own performance criteria.

Individual Differences. Finally, a variety of *individual differences*, such as personal abilities, traits, and skills, can influence in no small way the nature of interpersonal relations. Individual dominance, aggressiveness, authoritarianism, and tolerance for ambiguity all seem to influence how an individual deals with potential conflict. Indeed, such characteristics may determine whether or not conflict is created at all.

A Model of the Conflict Process

Having examined specific factors that are known to facilitate conflict, we can ask how conflict comes about in organizations. The most commonly accepted model of the conflict process was developed by Kenneth Thomas. This model, shown in Figure 8.3.1, consists of four stages: (1) frustration, (2) conceptualization, (3) behavior, and (4) outcome.

Stage 1: Frustration. As we have seen, conflict situations originate when an individual or group feels **frustration** in the pursuit of important goals. This frustration may be caused by a wide variety of factors, including disagreement over performance goals, failure to get a promotion or pay raise, a fight over scarce economic resources, new rules or policies, and so forth. In fact, conflict can be traced to frustration over almost anything a group or individual cares about.

Stage 2: Conceptualization. In stage 2, the conceptualization stage of the model, parties to the conflict attempt to understand the nature of the problem, what they themselves want as a resolution, what they think their opponents want as a resolution, and various strategies they feel each side may employ in resolving the conflict. This stage is really the problem-solving and strategy phase. For instance, when management and union negotiate a labor contract, both sides attempt to decide what is most important and what can be bargained away in exchange for these priority needs.

Stage 3: Behavior. The third stage in Thomas’s model is actual *behavior*. As a result of the conceptualization process, parties to a conflict attempt to implement their resolution mode by competing or accommodating in the hope of resolving problems. A major task here is determining how best to proceed strategically. That is, what tactics will the party use to attempt to resolve the conflict? Thomas has identified five modes for conflict resolution, as shown in Figure 8.3.1. These are (1) competing, (2) collaborating, (3) compromising, (4) avoiding, and (5) accommodating. Also shown in the exhibit are situations that seem most appropriate for each strategy.

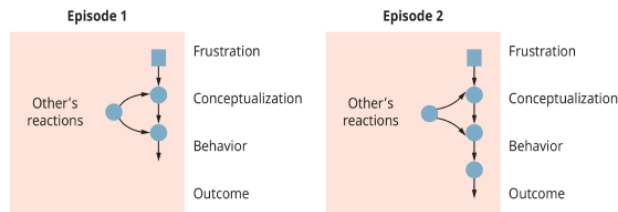


Figure 8.3.1. **A Model of the Conflict Process** Source: Adapted from Kenneth Thomas, “Conflict and Conflict Management,” in M. D. Dunnette (ed.), *Handbook of Industrial and Organizational Behavior* (New York: Wiley, 1976), p. 895. (Attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license)

The choice of an appropriate conflict resolution mode depends to a great extent on the situation and the goals of the party. This is shown graphically in Figure 8.3.2. According to this model, each party must decide the extent to which it is interested in satisfying its own concerns—called **assertiveness**—and the extent to which it is interested in helping satisfy the opponent’s concerns—called **cooperativeness**. Assertiveness can range from assertive to unassertive on one continuum, and cooperativeness can range from uncooperative to cooperative on the other continuum.

Once the parties have determined their desired balance between the two competing concerns—either consciously or unconsciously—the resolution strategy emerges. For example, if a union negotiator feels confident she can win on an issue that is of primary concern to union members (e.g., wages), a direct competition mode may be chosen (see upper left-hand corner of Figure 8.3.2). On the other hand, when the union is indifferent to an issue or when it actually supports management’s concerns (e.g., plant safety), we would expect an accommodating or collaborating mode (on the right-hand side of the exhibit).

Five Modes of Resolving Conflict

Conflict-Handling Modes	Appropriate Situations
Competing	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. When quick, decisive action is vital—e.g., emergencies 2. On important issues where unpopular actions need implementing—e.g., cost cutting, enforcing unpopular rules, discipline 3. On issues vital to company welfare when you know you’re right 4. Against people who take advantage of noncompetitive behavior
<p>Source: Adapted from K. W. Thomas, “Toward Multidimensional Values in Teaching: The Example of Conflict Behaviors,” <i>Academy of Management Review</i> 2 (1977), Table 1, p. 487.</p>	

Conflict-Handling Modes	Appropriate Situations
Collaborating	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. When trying to find an integrative solution when both sets of concerns are too important to be compromised 2. When your objective is to learn 3. When merging insights from people with different perspectives 4. When gaining commitment by incorporating concerns into a consensus 5. When working through feelings that have interfered with a relationship
Compromising	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. When goals are important but not worth the effort or potential disruption of more assertive modes 2. When opponents with equal power are committed to mutually exclusive goals 3. When attempting to achieve temporary settlements to complex issues 4. When arriving at expedient solutions under time pressure 5. As a backup when collaboration or competition is unsuccessful
Avoiding	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. When an issue is trivial, or when more important issues are pressing 2. When you perceive no chance of satisfying your concerns 3. When potential disruption outweighs the benefits of resolution 4. When letting people cool down and regain perspective 5. When gathering information supersedes immediate decision 6. When others can resolve the conflict more effectively 7. When issues seem tangential or symptomatic of other issues
Accommodating	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. When you find you are wrong—to allow a better position to be heard, to learn, and to show your reasonableness 2. When issues are more important to others than yourself—to satisfy others and maintain cooperation 3. When building social credits for later issues 4. When minimizing loss when you are outmatched and losing 5. When harmony and stability are especially important. 6. When allowing subordinates to develop by learning from mistakes.
<p>Source: Adapted from K. W. Thomas, "Toward Multidimensional Values in Teaching: The Example of Conflict Behaviors," <i>Academy of Management Review</i> 2 (1977), Table 1, p. 487.</p>	

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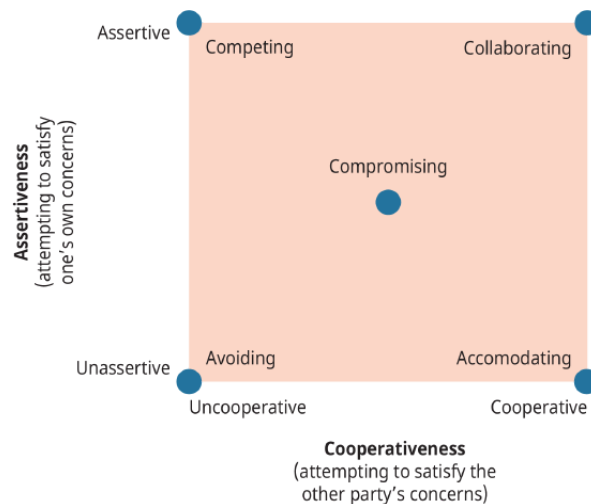


Figure 8.3.2 **Approaches to Conflict Resolution** Source: Adapted from Kenneth Thomas, “Conflict and Conflict Management,” in M. D. Dunnette (ed.), *Handbook of Industrial and Organizational Behavior* (New York: Wiley, 1976), p. 900. (Attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license)

What is interesting in this process is the assumptions people make about their own modes compared to their opponents’. For example, in one study of executives, it was found that the executives typically described themselves as using collaboration or compromise to resolve conflict, whereas these same executives typically described their opponents as using a competitive mode almost exclusively. In other words, the executives underestimated their opponents’ concern as uncompromising. Simultaneously, the executives had flattering portraits of their own willingness to satisfy both sides in a dispute.

Stage 4: Outcome. Finally, as a result of efforts to resolve the conflict, both sides determine the extent to which a satisfactory resolution or outcome has been achieved. Where one party to the conflict does not feel satisfied or feels only partially satisfied, the seeds of discontent are sown for a later conflict, as shown in the preceding Figure 14.1.1. One unresolved conflict episode can easily set the stage for a second episode. Managerial action aimed at achieving quick and satisfactory resolution is vital; failure to initiate such action leaves the possibility (more accurately, the probability) that new conflicts will soon emerge.

? Exercise 8.3.1

Describe the process of the conflict model.

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