

8.9: Conflict is Normal

Learning Objectives

1. Describe the role of contradiction, negation, and rational unit in the thought of Friedrich Hegel
2. Identify two opposing models for characterizing conflict
3. List ways in which healthy conflict can benefit a group

That which is willed happens but rarely; in the majority of instances the numerous desired ends cross and conflict with one another, or these ends themselves are from the outset incapable of realization, or the means of attaining them are insufficient. Thus the conflicts of innumerable individual wills and individual actions in the domain of history produce a state of affairs entirely analogous to that prevailing in the realm of unconscious nature. - Friedrich Engels

I don't like that person. I'm going to have to get to know him better. - Abraham Lincoln

A cartoon from the 1970s shows two women standing behind a couch where their husbands are sitting and watching a football game. One woman says to the other, “I thought they settled all that last year!” Do you suppose it would be nice if people could settle their differences once and for all, if conflict would just go away, and if everyone would just agree with each other and get along all the time?

Of course, those rosy developments aren’t going to take place. Conflict seems to stubbornly retain its position as part of the human landscape; you can hardly find a group of people who aren’t experiencing it right now or have never experienced it.

There’s reason to believe, too, that a moderate amount of conflict can actually be a healthy and necessary part of group life if it is handled productively and ethically. (Amason, A. C. (1996). Distinguishing the effects of functional and dysfunctional conflict on strategic decision making: Resolving a paradox for top management teams. *Academy of Management Journal*, 39, 123–148). We may actually be better off, in other words, if we experience conflict than if we don’t, provided that we turn it to advantage.

The 19th-century German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel believed that contradiction and negation, which constitute both causes and ingredients of conflict, lead every domain of reality toward higher rational unity. He wrote that each level of interaction among human beings, including those which take place in larger social structures, preserves the contradictions of previous levels as phases and subparts Pelczynski, A.Z. (1984). ‘The significance of Hegel’s separation of the state and civil society. (In A.Z. Pelczynski (Ed.), *The State and Civil Society* (pp. 1–13). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.).

Much more recently, research by Jehn and Mannix, (Jehn, K. A., & Mannix, E. A. (2001). The dynamic nature of conflict: A longitudinal study of intergroup conflict and group performance. *Academy of Management Journal*, 44, 238–251) indicated that “effective teams over time are characterized by low but increasing levels of task conflict, low levels of relationship conflict with a rise toward the end of a project, and moderate levels of task conflict in the middle of the task timeline.”

Conflict and the Hope of Social Change

Many years ago one of the authors attended a multi-day workshop in New York City on how to promote international peace and reconciliation. After hearing a presentation at the workshop about nuclear proliferation and biological weapons, a participant asked, “Human history is full of violence, bloodshed, and cruelty. What hope do we have of ever saving ourselves?”

The presenter replied, “Yes, we’ve had violence and bloodshed and cruelty throughout history. And as long as there are differences between people and their opinions, the danger will exist that we’ll destroy ourselves, especially now that we have weapons that can wipe out our whole species. But the question isn’t, ‘Can we eliminate conflict?’ The question is really, ‘Can we accept conflict as part of the human condition and handle it so that we move forward instead of annihilating ourselves?’”

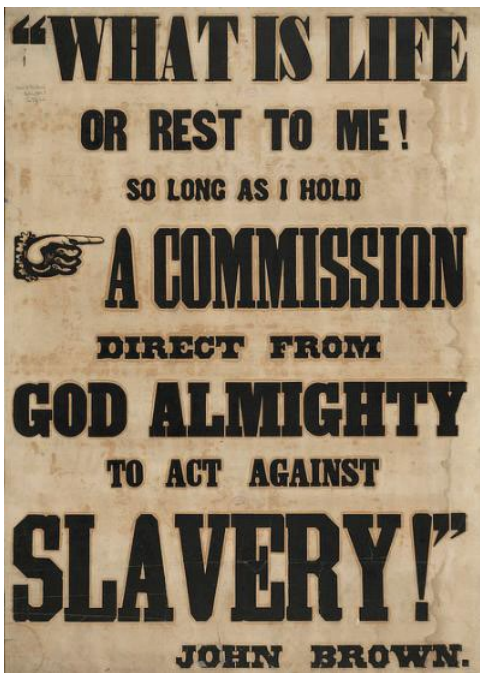


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8.9.1

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The presenter then offered what she said were signs of hope that groups of people can, indeed, work through even profound differences without descending into chaos or perpetual hatred. Slavery was once considered a normal part of society, she said, but no more. Child labor, too, used to be considered acceptable. And miscegenation laws existed in the United States until 1967. The presenter's point here was that, with hard work, groups can overcome past evils and deficiencies if they're willing to work through the conflict that invariably crops up when individuals are asked to change their behavior.

Two Models of Conflict

The presenter in New York went on to say that we can conceive conflict in terms of two models. The first is the cancer model, which portrays conflict as an insidious and incessantly expanding element which if left to itself will inevitably overwhelm and destroy a group. If we accept this model, conflict must either be prevented, if possible, or extirpated if it does manage to take root.

In the friction model, by contrast, conflict is seen as a natural by-product of human relations. Any machine generates waste heat simply through the interaction of its component parts, and this heat seldom threatens to halt the actions of the machine as long as people conduct preventive and ongoing maintenance—adding oil, greasing joints, and so forth. Likewise, according to this model, groups inevitably produce conflict through the interaction of their members and need not fear that it will destroy them as long as they handle it wisely. Saul Alinsky, a prominent 20th-century community organizer, wrote these words in support of the friction model of conflict: “Change means movement. Movement means friction. Only in the frictionless vacuum of a nonexistent abstract world can movement or change occur without that abrasive friction of conflict.” (Alinsky, S. (1971). *Rules for radicals: A pragmatic primer for realistic radicals*. New York: Random House).

Benefits of Healthy Conflict

Without conflict, life in general can easily become stagnant and tedious. When conflict is absent in a group, it often means that people are silencing themselves and holding back their opinions. If group discussions are significant, rather than merely routine, then varying opinions about the best course of action should be expected to arise. If people suppress their opinions, on the other hand, groupthink may spread and the final result may not be the best solution.

One favorable feature of healthy conflict is that people engaged in it point out difficulties or weaknesses in proposed alternatives and work together to solve them. As noted in another section, a key to keeping conflict healthy is to make sure that discussion remains focused on the task rather than upon people's personalities.

If it is properly guided and not allowed to deteriorate into damaging forms, conflict can benefit a group in several ways. Besides broadening the range of ideas which group members take into consideration, it can help people clarify their own views and those of others so that they have a better chance of sharing a common understanding of issues. It can also help group members unearth erroneous assumptions about one another. Finally, it can actually make a group more cohesive as members realize they are surmounting difficulties together. In short, conflict is indeed normal.

Key Takeaway

Conflict may be viewed as a pernicious and destructive element of group interaction, but considering it as a normal by-product of human relationships is a more accurate perspective.

Exercise 8.9.1

1. An adage says, "If you want an omelet, you have to break some eggs." To what degree do you subscribe to this folk saying? What reservations, if any, do you have about how it has been or might be used with respect to social change?
2. Some conflict throughout history has spread perniciously, as the cancer model might suggest. Have you personally experienced such enlargement of conflict in a group? If so, what factors do you believe contributed to the situation? At what point did normal friction among the group's members turn into a more harmful form of conflict?
3. Describe a situation in which you gained increased important understanding as a result of conflict in a group you were part of.

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