

8.2: Conflict in Organizations - Basic Considerations

How do you recognize and resolve short- and long-term conflicts among group members and among groups?

By any standard of comparison, conflict in organizations represents an important topic for managers. Just how important it is can be seen in the results of a study of how managers spend their time. It was found that approximately 20 percent of top and middle managers' time was spent dealing with some form of conflict. In another study, it was found that managerial skill in handling conflict was a major predictor of managerial success and effectiveness.

A good example of the magnitude of the problems that conflict can cause in an organization is the case of General Concrete, Inc., of Coventry, Rhode Island. Operations at this concrete plant came to a halt for more than three weeks because the plant's one truck driver and sole member of the Teamsters Union began picketing after he was laid off by the company. The company intended to use other drivers from another of their plants. In response to the picketing, not a single employee of General Concrete crossed the picket line, thereby closing the plant and costing the company a considerable amount in lost production and profit. Could this problem have been handled better? We shall see.

In the sections that follow, several aspects of conflict in organizations are considered. First, conflict is defined, and variations of conflict are considered by type and by level. Next, constructive and destructive aspects of conflict are discussed. A basic model of the conflict process is then examined, followed by a look at several of the more prominent antecedents of conflict. Finally, effective and ineffective strategies for conflict resolution are contrasted. Throughout, emphasis is placed on problem identification and problem resolution.

There are many ways to determine conflict as it relates to the workplace. For our purposes here, we will define **conflict** as the process by which individuals or groups react to other entities that have frustrated, or are about to frustrate, their plans, goals, beliefs, or activities. In other words, conflict involves situations in which the expectations or actual goal-directed behaviors of one person or group are blocked—or about to be blocked—by another person or group. Hence, if a sales representative cannot secure enough funds to mount what she considers to be an effective sales campaign, conflict can ensue. Similarly, if A gets promoted and B doesn't, conflict can emerge. Finally, if a company finds it necessary to lay off valued employees because of difficult financial conditions, conflict can occur. Many such examples can be identified; in each, a situation emerges in which someone or some group cannot do what it wants to do (for whatever reason) and responds by experiencing an inner frustration.

Types of Conflict

If we are to try to understand the roots of conflict, we need to know what type of conflict is present. At least four *types of conflict* can be identified:

1. *Goal conflict.* **Goal conflict** can occur when one person or group desires a different outcome than others do. This is simply a clash over whose goals are going to be pursued.
2. *Cognitive conflict.* **Cognitive conflict** can result when one person or group holds ideas or opinions that are inconsistent with those of others. This type of conflict is evident in political debates.
3. *Affective conflict.* This type of conflict emerges when one person's or group's feelings or emotions (attitudes) are incompatible with those of others. **Affective conflict** is seen in situations where two individuals simply don't get along with each other.
4. *Behavioral conflict.* **Behavioral conflict** exists when one person or group does something (i.e., behaves in a certain way) that is unacceptable to others. Dressing for work in a way that "offends" others and using profane language are examples of behavioral conflict.

Each of these types of conflict is usually triggered by different factors, and each can lead to very different responses by the individual or group.

Levels of Conflict

In addition to different types of conflict, there exist several different *levels* of conflict. *Level* refers to the number of individuals involved in the conflict. That is, is the conflict within just one person, between two people, between two or more groups, or between two or more organizations? Both the causes of a conflict and the most effective means to resolve it can be affected by level. Four such levels can be identified:

1. *Intrapersonal conflict.* **Intrapersonal conflict** is conflict within one person. We often hear about someone who has an approach-avoidance conflict; that is, she is both attracted to and repelled by the same object. Similarly, a person can be attracted to two equally appealing alternatives, such as two good job offers (approach-approach conflict) or repelled by two equally unpleasant alternatives, such as the threat of being fired if one fails to identify a coworker guilty of breaking plant rules (avoidance-avoidance conflict). In any case, the conflict is within the individual.
2. *Interpersonal conflict.* Conflict can also take form in an **interpersonal conflict**, where two individuals disagree on some matter. For example, you can have an argument with a coworker over an issue of mutual concern. Such conflicts often tend to get highly personal because only two parties are involved and each person embodies the opposing position in the conflict. Hence, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between the opponent's position and her person.
3. *Intergroup conflict.* Third, conflict can be found between groups. **Intergroup conflict** usually involves disagreements between two opposing forces over goals or the sharing of resources. For example, we often see conflict between the marketing and production units within a corporation as each vies for more resources to accomplish its subgoals. Intergroup conflict is typically the most complicated form of conflict because of the number of individuals involved. Coalitions form within and between groups, and an "us-against-them" mentality develops. Here, too, is an opportunity for groupthink to develop and thrive.
4. *Interorganizational conflict.* Finally, we can see **interorganizational conflict** in disputes between two companies in the same industry (for example, a disagreement between computer manufacturers over computer standards), between two companies in different industries or economic sectors (for example, a conflict between real estate interests and environmentalists over land use planning), and even between two or more countries (for example, a trade dispute between the United States and Japan or France). In each case, both parties inevitably feel the pursuit of their goals is being frustrated by the other party.

The Positive and Negative Sides of Conflict

People often assume that all conflict is necessarily bad and should be eliminated. On the contrary, there are some circumstances in which a moderate amount of conflict can be helpful. For instance, conflict can lead to the search for new ideas and new mechanisms as solutions to organizational problems. Conflict can stimulate innovation and change. It can also facilitate employee motivation in cases where employees feel a need to excel and, as a result, push themselves in order to meet performance objectives.

Conflict can at times help individuals and group members grow and develop self-identities. As noted by Coser:

Conflict, which aims at a resolution of tension between antagonists, is likely to have stabilizing and integrative functions for the relationship. By permitting immediate and direct expression of rival claims, such social systems are able to readjust their structures by eliminating their sources of dissatisfaction. The multiple conflicts which they experience may serve to eliminate the causes for dissociation and to reestablish unity. These systems avail themselves, through the toleration and institutionalization of conflict, of an important stabilizing mechanism.

Conflict can, on the other hand, have negative consequences for both individuals and organizations when people divert energies away from performance and goal attainment and direct them toward resolving the conflict. Continued conflict can take a heavy toll in terms of psychological well-being. As we will see in the next chapter, conflict has a major influence on stress and the psychophysical consequences of stress. Finally, continued conflict can also affect the social climate of the group and inhibit group cohesiveness.

Thus, conflict can be either functional or dysfunctional in work situations depending upon the nature of the conflict, its intensity, and its duration. Indeed, both too much and too little conflict can lead to a variety of negative outcomes, as discussed above. This is shown in Figure 8.2.1. In such circumstances, a moderate amount of conflict may be the best course of action. The issue for management, therefore, is not how to eliminate conflict but rather how to manage and resolve it when it occurs.

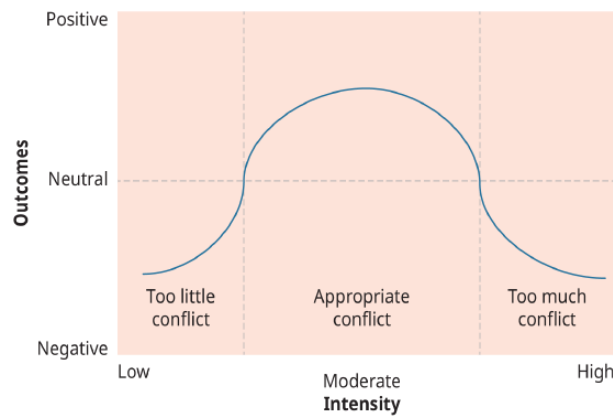


Figure 8.2.1 **The Relationship Between Conflict Intensity and Outcomes** Source: Adapted from L. David Brown, *Managing Conflict at Organizational Interfaces*, 1986 by Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., Inc., Reading, Massachusetts, Figure 1.1, p.8. (Attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license)

Managerial Leadership

Executive Conflict Resolution Strategies

A good way to see how conflict can be functional or dysfunctional is to observe the behaviors of many of America's CEOs. Classic examples include the cases of Jack Welch, former chairman of General Electric, and Fred Ackman, former chairman of Superior Oil. Welch enjoyed a good fight and took pleasure in the give-and-take of discussions and negotiations. On one occasion, he engaged a senior vice president in a prolonged and emotional shouting match over the merits of a certain proposal. Several managers who were present were embarrassed by the confrontation. Yet after the argument, Welch thanked the vice president for standing up to him and defending his views. This is what Welch calls "constructive conflict," also termed **constructive confrontation**.

On the other hand, according to one account, Fred Ackman approached conflict quite differently. Ackman has been accused of being autocratic—he often refused even to discuss suggestions or modifications to proposals he presented. Disagreement was seen as disloyalty and was often met with an abusive temper. As one former subordinate said, "He couldn't stand it when someone disagreed with him, even in private. He'd eat you up alive, calling you a dumb S.O.B. . . . It happened all the time."

Many today will suggest that Jack Welch's management approach and the conglomerate approach of GE has led to the company's fiscal problems, while others fault the direction that Jack Welch's successor Jeff Immelt. Others say that leaders at other companies, such as Apple's Tim Cook, are making the same leadership errors as Jack Welch.

Questions:

1. How do you feel you respond to such conflict?
2. Would your friends agree with your assessment?

Sources:

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? Exercise 8.2.1

How can the use of power help and harm organizations?

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