Conflict Management

“Conflict is an integral part of the human experience since it’s one of our primary incentives to grow and learn. The bedrock of all conflicts is differences—different goals, experiences, genders, cultures, and other factors. When we attempt to resolve our conflicts, we are really performing the repair or maintenance work necessary because of the stress that our differences place on our relationships. In conflict resolution, we seek healing, harmony and reconciliation. The University of Alberta is a very diverse environment. Conflicts will arise because of our differences. But there is help available for us. When faced with a conflict with another person, you may contact, Office of Human Rights, and they will help you unravel the conflict and set a course for resolution.”

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Conflict can be defined as a disagreement through which the parties involved perceive a threat to their needs, interests or concerns. Conflict can be at either individual level, group level or organization level. (Gellejah, 2000). Hence it hence refers to any situation where there are incompatible goals, thoughts or emotions within or between individuals or groups that end up in opposition. Conflict is not only inevitable (Putnam, 1995), but it is also the nature of complex organizations or relationships.

How to Manage Conflicts

“How people respond to situations of conflict is learned, both in terms of which interests are viewed as priorities and which approaches they employ while pursuing those interests”. (Axelrod and Johnson, 2005:14)

Conflict in any form, whether disagreements, differences of opinions, divergent interpretations, struggles for control, and/or multiple perspectives are natural and pervasive in organizing processes; and negotiation is, among other things, the quintessence of managing these conflicts (See, Geist, 1995). Negotiation is the interaction engaged in by actors – their everyday practices and strategies (Ibid).

Figure 1: Phases of Conflict Resolution

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Phase 1: Differentiation</th>
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<td>In this phase interactants (conflicting parties) do the following:</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Define the problem,</td>
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<td>- Raise the conflict issue,</td>
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<td>- Clarify facts and feelings regarding the problem,</td>
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<td>- Pursue the reasons behind those positions, and</td>
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<td>- Acknowledge the severity of positional differences.</td>
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<th>Phase 2: Mutual Problem Definition</th>
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<td>This phase optimizes on two fronts, i.e. Differentiation and Integration:</td>
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<td>- Describes the problem in mutual terms where each part accepts responsibility for the conditions of conflict and socially constructs the conflict in understandable terms, and</td>
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<td>- The problem is described as one requiring the efforts to reach a solution that achieves the goals of each party.</td>
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<th>Phase 3: Integration</th>
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<td>This phase optimizes communication behaviors such as</td>
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<td>- Postponing evaluations,</td>
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<td>- Maintaining cooperative tactics,</td>
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<td>- Generating alternative solutions,</td>
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<td>- Decide on a mutually acceptable solution,</td>
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<td>- Evaluating the negative and positive aspect of each solution,</td>
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<td>- Selecting and clarifying the solution to be implemented, and</td>
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<td>- Establishing a monitoring system to determine if</td>
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Source: Adapted and expanded from Papa and Canary, 1995
Although conflict is a part of organization life that provides numerous opportunities for growth through improved understanding and insight, there is a tendency to view conflict as a negative experience caused by unusually difficult circumstances.

Disputants tend to perceive limited options and resources available in seeking solutions, rather than multiple possibilities that may exist ‘outside the box’ for conflict resolution. However, organizational researchers view conflicts as an inevitable and pervasive aspect of organizational life (Papa and Canary, 1995)

**Figure 2: Key Interests at Stake for Different Sources of Conflict, and the Primary Emotional Impacts if Interests are not met**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Interest</th>
<th>Source of Conflict</th>
<th>Process</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
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<tr>
<td>Psychological</td>
<td>Reduction of Anxiety</td>
<td>Happiness</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Self-respect</td>
<td>Sense of Accomplishment</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
<td>Job Satisfaction</td>
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<tr>
<td>If not met,</td>
<td>FEAR</td>
<td>If not met</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>RESENTMENT</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Practical</td>
<td>Sense of Fairness</td>
<td>Financial Reward</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Own Interests Considered</td>
<td>Reputation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other’s Interests Known</td>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If not met,</td>
<td>ANGER</td>
<td>If not met,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LOSS</td>
<td>LOSS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted and expanded from Axelrod and Johnson, 2005:13

From Figure 2, key psychological interests for “process conflicts” include avoidance of anxiety, and enhanced self-respect and self-esteem. If these are not included in the process of decision-making, you are likely to experience some level of fear driven by the uncertainty created by this exclusion.

Likewise, if key practical interests in the process conflict (i.e. a sense of confidence in the fairness of the process, knowledge that your own interests and ideas are being heard and considered) are undermined, you are likely to get angry at the injustice of the process.

If the psychological outcome of a conflict, such as sense of accomplishment, job satisfaction, and the overall sense of happiness with one’s situation are not met, you are likely to become resentful of the other person(s) who appear to be satisfied with their outcome.

Similarly, if key practical interests (i.e. financial rewards, professional reputation, and stable and well-functioning relationships) are not met; your primary initial response will certainly be a strong sense of loss.

The following tips are useful for effectively managing conflict in your workplace, in relationships, or in other situations where you have an interest in seeking a negotiated solution.

These tips won't guarantee an agreement, but they greatly improve the likelihood that the problems can be understood, solutions explored, and consideration of the advantages of a negotiated agreement can occur within a relatively constructive environment. They provide useful strategies to consider that reduce the impacts of stress, fears and "surprise" factors involved in dealing with conflict.
Tips

1. Be proactive instead of reactive.
   Good plans shape good decisions. Thus, when facing conflicts around you, be proactive and not reactive to the situation at hand.

2. Be slow to anger, especially over insignificant issues
   Know that, anger is always more harmful than the insult that caused it.

3. Know thyself and take care of self
   Understand your “perceptual filters” biases, triggers. Try also to create a personally affirming environment (eat, sleep, exercise).

4. Clarify personal needs threatened by the disputes
   You should be able to clarify your personal needs whether substantive, procedural, and/or psychological needs. Hence, identify “Desired Outcomes” from a negotiated process.

5. Identify a safe place for negotiation
   To identify a safe place for negotiation you can do the following:
   - Find an appropriate space for discussion - should possibly be private and neutral.
   - Agree on mutual consent for negotiation - appropriate time.
   - Support people (facilitators, mediators, advocates), as needed.
   - Agree to ground rules resulting from the negotiation process.

Additional Tips for Managing your own Anger or Conflict

Being able to manage your own anger is an important life-skill that can certainly help you dissipate its self-destructive effects and move toward resolution in your conflict. Here are the methods or techniques (adapted from Cloke and Goldsmith) for managing your own anger:

1. Own it
   Don’t blame anyone else for your anger. Be responsible for your own intense feelings and for openly and constructively expressing them.

2. Discover the underlying reasons for it
   Ask yourself why you are angry, what triggered your emotion, and what deeper emotions or prior experiences are connected to it.

3. Share your feelings and perceptions non-judgmentally
   Drop all self-justifications, defences, and judgments you are using to support your anger. Avoid statements such as “you are wrong” and clearly indicate what was done that made you mad. Use “I” statements, report your feelings.
4. **Ask questions to discover whether your perceptions are accurate**
   Ask questions to find out more about what happened and if the other person meant to treat you disrespectfully, and if so, why.

5. **Focus on solving the problem rather than blaming others for it**
   Try to define a problem as an “it” rather than a “you.” Brainstorm possible solutions with your opponent.

6. **Avoid responding defensively**
   Instead of defending your behaviour, consider the possibility that you may have been wrong, or that you and your opponent may both be right. Explore these possibilities openly.

7. **Clarify your expectations**
   State exactly, specifically, and in detail what you expect from the other part. If the other part cannot meet your expectations, you can always negotiate more realistic expectations, so they will be clearer about what you really want.

8. **Ask for help where possible**
   Ask a third person to mediate or facilitate your communication.

9. **Apologize and start over**
   Understand that an apology is a declaration of ownership of what is not working, and a request for improvement. Your apology is an acknowledgement that your relationship with the other person is more important than being right.

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**Activities to Do On Your Own**

Take some time to respond to the following quiz (Adapted from Andrew DuBrian), check the answer that best fits your typical reaction to the situation described.

When you’ve completed the questions, add all the As, Bs, Cs, andDs to find where you collected the most responses. Then consider the four profiles below. However, no one style of conflict management is better than another. Most people use all four depending on the situation. DuBrian suggests that, if you rely too much on one, start shifting your approach.

1. When someone is overly hostile toward me, I usually:
   - A. respond in kind
   - B. persuade him or her to cool down
   - C. hear the person out
   - D. walk away

2. When I see conflict developing between two people I care about, I usually:
   - A. express disappointment
   - B. try to mediate
   - C. watch to see what develops
   - D. leave the scene
3. When I see conflict developing between two people who are relatively unimportant to me, I usually:
   _____ A. express disappointment
   _____ B. try to mediate
   _____ C. watch to see what develops
   _____ D. leave the scene

4. When having serious disagreements, I:
   _____ A. talk until I've made my point
   _____ B. talk a little more than I listen
   _____ C. listen and make sure I understand
   _____ D. listen passively

5. When someone does something that angers me, I generally:
   _____ A. use strong, direct language
   _____ B. try to persuade him or her to stop
   _____ C. go easy, explaining how I feel
   _____ D. say and do nothing

**Profiles**

Competitive – If you picked mostly “A” responses, you feel best when you are able to direct and control others. Taking to extremes, you can be intimidating and judgmental.

Collaborative – If you scored high in “B” category, you use persuasion, not intimidation, and are willing to compromise to end long-running conflicts.

Sharing – People who score high in “C” category, listen to the opponent point of view, analyze situations, and make a factual pitch for their case, but in the end they may differ to opponents in the interest of harmony.

Accommodative – A high score in “D” category suggests that you avoid conflict and confrontation at all costs and suppress your feelings – strong as they may be – to keep peace.

**Other Resources**


- [http://www.crmhq.org/](http://www.crmhq.org/)
- [http://www.ohrd.wisc.edu/onlinetraining/resolution/aboutwhatish.htm#whatisconflict](http://www.ohrd.wisc.edu/onlinetraining/resolution/aboutwhatish.htm#whatisconflict)
- [http://www.campus-adr.org/Faculty_Club/tips_faculty.html](http://www.campus-adr.org/Faculty_Club/tips_faculty.html)
- [http://www.upenn.edu/fsap/conflict.htm](http://www.upenn.edu/fsap/conflict.htm)
- [http://www.workconflicts.com/ManagingPressure10.html](http://www.workconflicts.com/ManagingPressure10.html)
- [http://www.ronkelly.com/RonKellyTools.html#KeyQuestions](http://www.ronkelly.com/RonKellyTools.html#KeyQuestions)