

Conflict Resolution

INTRODUCTION TO CONFLICT

People have different thoughts and feelings about conflict. Those thoughts and feelings are usually a result of our personal and professional life experiences.

Please take a few moments to complete each of the sentences below. Please complete the sentences according to your beliefs. Then provide alternative endings based on how you think other people in your life might complete the sentences.

Conflict is: . .

Emotions involved in conflict situations include . . .

Methods for dealing with conflicts include . . .

INTRODUCTION TO CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

Although some people find conflict to be frustrating and a waste of time, conflict is a normal part of life. Conflict in and of itself is not positive or negative. Most conflicts, if managed effectively, can be constructive and result in positive outcomes. The conflict management skills selected by the individuals involved in a conflict determines whether the conflict will be constructive or destructive.

Conflict is:

- An inevitable part of everyday life.
- An opportunity for learning about other information or perspectives.
- An opportunity to correct an existing problem.
- An opportunity to prevent unnecessary future conflicts.

When a conflict arises an individual has essentially two choices:

- React emotionally (flight-fight response) or
- React strategically.

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT PROCESSES

Although conflict situations vary greatly depending on the underlying issues, available time, and the individuals involved, it is helpful to have a process in mind for managing conflicts. Two conflict management processes are described below because some conflicts require an immediate, on-the-spot solution while other conflicts require an in-depth problem-solving approach.

On-the-Spot Conflict Management Process

1. Stop and Think

- Identify your goal(s) in the conflict. Consider short-term and long-term goals.
- Identify the source(s) of the conflict.
- Choose the conflict response style that will most likely help you achieve your goal(s)?

2. Engage in Cooperative Communication

- Express emotions appropriately.
- Use verbal and non-verbal language that does not escalate the conflict.
- Acknowledge others' perspectives then share your perspective.
- Share interests.

3. Agree on a Solution

- Quickly identify potential options for resolving the conflict.
- Compromise if a win-win cannot be achieved. (If a compromise is absolutely not appropriate then try to reach agreement on next steps.)
- Be specific about the terms of the agreement and put it in writing.
- If agreement cannot be reached try to agree on next steps.

Planned Conflict Management Process

1. Stop and Think

- Identify your goal(s) in this conflict. Consider short-term and long-term goals.
- Identify the source(s) of the conflict.
- Choose the conflict response style that will most likely help you achieve your goal(s)?
- Schedule a convenient time to discuss the situation.

2. Share Perspectives

- Express emotions appropriately.
- Use verbal and non-verbal language that does not escalate the conflict.
- Acknowledge their perspective then share your perspective.
- Share interests.

3. Explore Options for Resolution

- Brainstorm options for resolving the conflict.
- Gather additional information, if necessary.
- Revisit personal goal(s) and interests.

4. Agree on a Solution

- Evaluate and prioritize all options.
- Compromise if a win-win cannot be achieved. (If a compromise is absolutely not appropriate then try to reach agreement on next steps.)
- Be specific about the terms of the agreement and put it in writing.
- If agreement cannot be reached try to agree on next steps.

5. Follow Up

- If an agreement is reached, schedule a time to follow up and review the agreement to see if it has been or continues to be effective.

TYPES OF CONFLICT

Conflict analysis requires an understanding of sources of conflict, types of conflicts, and conflict escalation and de-escalation. In addition, effective conflict managers must be able to take responsibility for their own role in a conflict

There are many ways to categorize conflicts. For the purposes of this workshop, conflict will be categorized as:

- **Intrapersonal Conflicts:** Conflicts within one's self.

Examples:

- **Interpersonal Conflicts:** Conflicts between two or more people that are caused by personal factors.

Examples:

- **Organizational Conflicts:** Conflicts between two or more people that are caused by organizational factors.

Examples:

- **Systems Conflicts:** Conflicts between two or more people that are caused by systems factors.

Examples:

Sources of Conflicts

Conflicts can arise for many different reasons. Some examples are listed below. Based on your experiences, you may add additional sources to the lists.

Intrapersonal Conflicts	Interpersonal Conflicts	Organizational Conflicts
Financial needs	Financial needs	Budgetary limitations
Time constraints	Time constraints	Project timelines
Lack of prioritization	Lack of prioritization	Lack of prioritization
Internal value conflicts	Miscommunication	Lack of clear goals
Self-Image (ego)	Different values	Miscommunication
Peer Pressure	Attitude toward conflict	Unknown policies
Short-term vs. Long-term goals	Different experiences	Unknown procedures
	Different goals	Lack of training
	Personality types	Power issues
	Self-Image (ego)	Cooperative vs. competitive workplace environment
	Lack of respect	Individual vs. collective rights
	Power issues	New culture vs. old culture

Sources of conflict may also be examined in other categories such as possessions, environment factors, opinions & values, control, personality traits.

The effective resolution of a conflict depends on the individuals' ability to identify the underlying source of the conflict. Potential solutions to conflicts vary greatly depending on the underlying source of the conflict. Just as it is important for a doctor to correctly diagnosis the illness underlying the stated symptoms, so must individuals correctly identify the source of conflict underlying the current problem. In both situations, an incorrect diagnosis will allow the underlying problem to continue to fester and make the real problem even more difficult to resolve.

Conflict Escalation and De-Escalation

Most daily conflicts are resolved simply without much concerted effort, because the conflicts are managed with effective conflict management skills and therefore they do not escalate.

When conflict escalation does occur, it is important for one or more of the individuals involved to recognize the escalation and to begin to use skills to de-escalate the conflict. Failure to do so, will likely lead the individuals to hard feeling and an impasse that will make the conflict more difficult to resolve at a later time or spawn new conflicts in the future.

Effective conflict managers are aware of factors that escalate conflicts and they have the ability to use de-escalation techniques even when the other individual(s) are intentionally or unknowingly engaging in escalation behaviors. Review the list below and add additional items based on your experiences.

Escalation Factors	De-Escalation Factors
Aggressive Body Language	Neutral Body Language
Raised Tone of Voice	Calm Tone of Voice
Accusatory Statements	Using "I" statements
Blaming Statements	Acknowledging/Validating Feelings
Vague Threats	Acknowledging Perspectives
Threats of Formal Action	Asking for Suggested Solutions
Personal Attacks or Insults	Scheduling a Specific Time to Talk

CHARTING CONFLICT ESCALATION EXERCISE

EXPRESSING EMOTIONS APPROPRIATELY

Many conflicts escalate and get out of control because individuals are unable to appropriately express their emotions in conflict situations. The importance of being able to express emotions appropriately has recently become the basis for several popular books related to the topic of emotional intelligence.

“Quite simply, emotional intelligence is the intelligent use of emotions: you *intentionally* make your emotions work for you by using them to help guide your behavior and thinking in ways that enhance your results. Applications of emotional intelligence in the workplace are almost infinite.”

Source: Emotional Intelligence at Work, Hendrie Weisinger, Ph.D., 1998

Emotions have the potential to create or escalate conflict. Like conflict, emotions are not necessarily good or bad; it's the inappropriate expression of emotions that often leads to the escalation of conflicts. Conversely, conflict has an impact on emotions. Generally, the longer a conflict exists, the more likely emotions will intensify and the more likely problem-solving skills will diminish.

The most frequently described emotion in conflict situations is anger. However, anger has been termed the “masked emotion”, because it hides underlying emotions such as hurt, fear, rejection, frustration, humiliation, or loneliness. It is important for individuals in conflict situations to have the skills to accurately perceive, identify and express emotions.

The first step in learning to use your emotions appropriately is to develop the ability to recognize what behaviors and situations trigger an emotional response from you. Please identify those triggers below.

Identify your emotional triggers (i.e., pet peeves, things that bug you, etc.):

The next step in learning to express your emotions appropriately is to develop methods for calming your emotions so that you can respond strategically rather than emotionally. It is important to have immediate and long-term calming methods because some conflicts require an on-the-spot resolution, which requires an on-the-spot calming of emotions. Calming one's emotions is not the same as "stuffing" the emotions. The process of calming or taming emotions allows an individual to vent the emotions in a way that does not escalate the conflict.

Identify ways in which you can calm/manage/tame your emotional triggers:

As noted above, the best way for individuals to control their emotions, so that they do not create or escalate conflict, is for individuals to know their hot buttons and to learn how to control them. The following four-step process, which can be easily remembered and practiced, is one quick and simple method for gaining control over emotions.

1. Name the Emotion. Be specific with how you feel. Remember, if you describe your emotion as anger or even upset and mad, delve deeper for the underlying feeling. Ask yourself, "What, exactly, am I feeling?"
2. Claim the Emotion. You must take responsibility for your emotional response to the conflict. You must acknowledge the feeling, whether it is appropriate or inappropriate
3. Tame the Emotion. If you are uncomfortable with the intensity of your emotions, engage in mental or physical activities that reduce them. Techniques include going on a mental vacation to a serene place, taking deep breaths, counting to 10 slowly or taking a walk. The important thing is to calm down and not react. You should also resist impulses to strike back, give in or walk out.
4. Reframe the Situation. When possible try to give the other person the benefit of the doubt. Try to avoid assigning a negative motive to the other person. This will allow you to approach problem-solving with a more cooperative attitude.
5. Aim the Emotion. Direct the energy of emotions into appropriate ways to handle the conflict. You may be able to identify and implement changes that will remedy or remove the source of your emotions.

This five-step process does not require you to share your emotions, although sharing your emotions with others may be helpful in some conflicts. This process does not deny the validity of strong feeling – it simply offers one way to channel strong emotions into constructive action.

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STYLE SURVEY

CHOOSING A CONFLICT RESPONSE

It is important to remember that in any conflict situation, an individual chooses how to respond. Individuals who have not developed their conflict management skills often respond based on their instinctive flight-fight impulse. This reactionary response to conflict situations seldom yields effective outcomes.

Effective conflict managers are able to control their initial instinctive response, and therefore, are able to strategically choose the most appropriate response based on their goal(s) in the given situation. These individuals do not respond based simply on habit or emotions, but base their responses on practical factors.

Researchers¹ have established that when confronted with a conflict situation, individuals choose from five basic conflict response styles which are commonly labeled as:

- avoiding
- accommodating
- compromising
- competing
- collaborating.

Individuals tend to prefer one style to the others, but in each conflict situation individuals have a choice to select the appropriate response style. The selection of the response style is critical to effective resolution. None of the conflict response styles are necessarily right or wrong; it's the appropriate matching of a response style to each conflict solution that determines whether the response results in escalation or constructive resolution of the conflict.

Avoiding Response

Individuals who use the avoiding response appropriately choose it to stay clear of trivial conflicts, cool down and reduce feelings of stress, gather additional information, and/or save resources when there is little or no chance of satisfying their interests. These individuals do not fear conflict, they simply pick their battles wisely. It is important to note that these individuals sometimes only choose avoiding as the first step, then select another response style to resolve the conflict after they have cooled down or gathered the appropriate information.

Individuals who use the avoiding response inappropriately tend to view any conflict as negative and something to avoid at almost any cost. In general, these individuals have a feeling of hopelessness in a conflict and are willing to allow others to make decisions about how the conflict should be resolved. It is difficult for these individuals to achieve their personal goals or maintain constructive relationships.

Accommodating Response

Individuals who place a high value on a personal relationship or accept another person's perspective use the accommodating response. In general, individuals who choose this response style are willing to listen with an open mind, be agreeable and flexible, sidestep conflict or unpleasant exchanges, acknowledge errors, strive to create and preserve positive relationships.

This response style is used appropriately for conflicts in which an individual has determined that the relationship is more important than achieving the desired goal, a constructive relationship is the goal or the other person is correct.

The accommodating response is inappropriate for conflict situations in which an individual's goals are very important. These individuals mistakenly attempt to maintain a relationship at all costs with little or no concern for their goals. Although their willingness to give in and appease the other person prevents harming the relationship, important goals are not satisfied.

Compromising Response

Individuals who choose the compromising response believe that something is better than nothing for both sides. In general, these individuals believe that a win-win solution is not possible and seek an expedient, mutually acceptable solution that partially satisfies each of the parties involved.

The compromising response is inappropriate if it is being used routinely to get a "quick fix" for a long-term problem or if it is forestalling the exchange of information that would create a win-win resolution.

However, the compromising response is appropriate in situations in which satisfying all interests is not important or in which full satisfaction of interests does not justify the

outlay of resources. In these situations, compromise provides a relatively quick resolution under time pressures and offers a way out of an impasse.

Competitive Response

Individuals who choose the competitive response are assertive and focus heavily on their goal(s). In general, these individuals assume that a win-win solution is not possible and that it is important for them to satisfy their goal(s).

Appropriate use of the competitive response occurs when an individual must make quick, decisive decisions or when an individual must commit to a particular position or principle.

It is inappropriate to select the competitive response when an immediate decision is not required and an on-going relationship between the individuals is important to satisfy long-term goals. Individuals who frequently use this response style are often labeled “difficult” because they believe they do not need information from others and view every conflict as a win-lose situation. Overuse of the competing response tends to damage relationships, create adversarial attitudes, and prevent effective conflict resolution over the long term.

Collaborative Response

Individuals who choose the collaborative response emphasize objectivity and the use of information and creativity to achieve mutually beneficial agreements. In general, this response is used by individuals who want to resolve a conflict through a process that maintains/improves relationship and helps all individuals achieve their goals. An important characteristic of the collaborating response is that it does not require an individual to decide whether preserving the relationship or satisfying goals is more important, because it attempts to achieve both. This conflict response style tends to create trust and therefore individuals are more willing to cooperate. As a result, the individuals improve relationships and build a sense of ownership in an agreement, which makes implementation and maintenance of the agreement much easier.

The collaborating response is appropriate when input from several individuals is necessary to achieve the best solution or when buy-in is necessary for effective implementation of a solution.

Because the collaborating response requires time for individuals to meet and share information and ideas, it is inappropriate to use this style when issues are trivial or a quick, decisive answer is required.

In Summary

Effective conflict management requires strategic responses that guided by the interests and goals involved in the conflict situation.

Poor conflict response habits, like most habits, are routine behaviors acted out without any conscious thought. Often these conflict habits are learned and just become a ritual way of handling conflicts. These habits can be overcome by acknowledging them and by remember to be strategic – instead of reactionary – when choosing a conflict response style.

EMPATHETIC LISTENING

Empathic listening is the skill of hearing a speaker's message and reflecting it back in a way that captures what the speaker has said in the listener's own words. This is an especially important skill in conflict situations because it lets other people know that they have been heard and understood. During problem solving, an empathic statement should reflect the facts and feelings expressed by the speaker.

Empathic listening enhances the conflict management process by:

- Allowing venting that helps dissipate the emotions
- Demonstrating a willingness to listen and try to understand the speaker's perspective
- Helping to clarify the listener's understanding of the feelings that are underlying the facts in the conflict situation

Effective empathic listeners also possess the skill to appropriately express their emotions as discussed earlier in this manual. Therefore, effective empathetic listeners are able to de-escalate conflict situations by helping others to express their emotions in a more appropriate way.

Empathic listening restatements should not include the words, "I understand why or how you could feel . . ." Telling individuals involved in the conflict that you "can understand just how they feel" may make them angry. Instead, it is best to begin by saying, "After listening to you I hear you saying . . ." or "Let me see if I understand what you are saying" or some other introductory phrase that is comfortable for you. ·