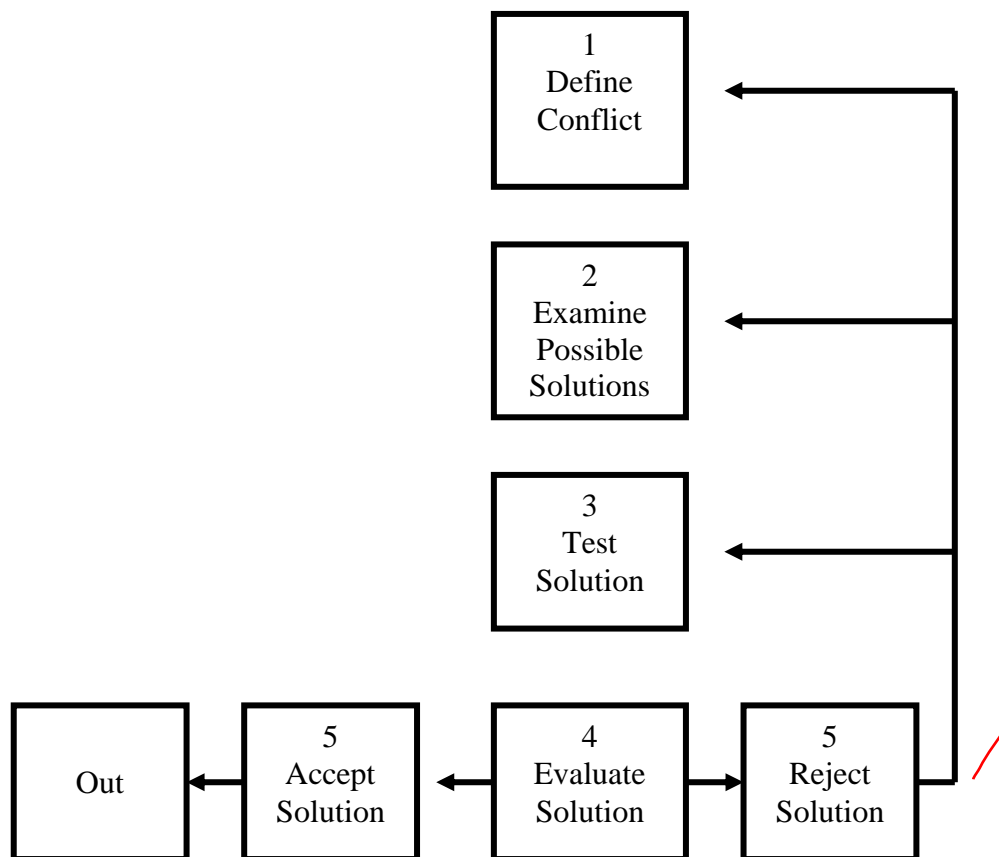


A MODEL OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION

The stages in Figure 11.1 explain conflict more fully and at the same time provide guidance in dealing with conflicts effectively. This model is based on the problem-solving technique introduced by John Dewey (1910) and used by most contemporary theorists (for example, Beebe and Masterson 1990; Patton, Griffin, and Patton 1989). The assumption made here is that interpersonal conflict is essentially a problem that needs to be solved. Begin at number 1 and work through the process of resolving conflict.

Figure 11.1
Stages of Conflict Resolution



Define the Conflict

Your first step is to define the conflict. This is the most essential step in the entire process of managing conflict. *Define both the content and the relationship issues.* Define the obvious content issues (who should do the dishes, who should take the kids to school, who should take out the dog) as well as the underlying relational issues (who's been avoiding household responsibilities, who's been neglecting their responsibilities towards the kid, whose time is more valuable).

Define the problem in specific terms. Conflict defined in the abstract is difficult to deal with and resolve. For example, the husband who complains that his wife is “cold and unfeeling” is defining the problem in such abstract terms that it will be difficult to reach agreement as to the conflict’s nature, let alone to resolve it. Instead, define the conflict by identifying specific behaviours. It is one thing for the husband to say his wife is “cold and unfeeling” and quite another to say she does not call him at the office or kiss him when he comes home or hold his hand when they are at a party. You can agree on and deal with these behaviours. The abstract “cold and unfeeling” remains elusive.

Throughout this definitive process, try to understand the conflict’s nature from the other person’s point of view. *Exercise your perspective-taking skills.* Why is your lover disturbed that you are not doing the dishes? Why is your neighbour complaining about taking the kids to school? Why is your mother insisting you take out the dog?

Avoid attempting to read the other person’s mind. Ask questions to make sure you *see the problem from the other person’s point of view*. Ask directly and simply. For example, “why are you insisting that I take the dog out now when I have to call three clients before nine o’clock?”

Whenever you think you understand the problem as seen by the other person, *check your perception again*.

Confirm the other person’s definition of the problem. Let the other person know that you understand how she or he thinks and feels about the problem. Watch assuming that the other person will be able to tell whether or not you understand.

Let us select an example and work it through the remaining steps. This conflict concerns Raul and Julia and revolves around Raul not wanting to socialise with Julia’s friends. While Julia is devoted to them, Raul actively dislikes them. Julia thinks they are wonderful and exciting. Raul thinks they are unpleasant and boring. Julia says these friends make her feel important and intelligent. For example, her friends frequently look to her for advice.

Examine Possible Solutions

Look for possible ways to resolve the conflict. Most conflicts probably can be resolved through a variety of solutions. At this stage try to identify as many solutions as possible.

Look for *win-win* solutions. Look for solutions that will enable both parties to win – to get something each wants. Avoid *win-lose* solutions. These solutions, in which one wins, and one loses will cause frustration and resentment.

In examining various solutions, carefully weigh the costs and the rewards that each solution will entail. Most will involve costs to one or both parties (after all someone has to take the dog out). Seek solutions in which the costs will be evenly shared. Similarly, seek solutions in which both parties share equally (or about equally) in the rewards. Once you have examined all possible solutions, select one and test it out.

Among the solutions that Raul and Julia identify are these:

1. Julia should not interact with her friends anymore.
2. Raul should interact with Julia's friends.
3. Julia should see her friends without Raul.

Clearly solutions 1 and 2 are win-lose solutions. In solution one Raul wins and Julia loses. In solution two Julia wins and Raul loses. Solution 3 has some possibilities. Both might win and neither must necessarily lose. Let's examine this solution more closely by testing it.

Test the Solution

Test the solution mentally. How does it feel now? How will it feel tomorrow? Are you comfortable with the solution? Would Raul be comfortable with Julia socialising with her friends without him? Some of Julia's friends are attractive unmarried men, is this going to make a difference? Would Julia be comfortable socialising with her friends without Raul? Will she give people too much to gossip about? Will she feel guilty? Will she enjoy herself without Raul?

Test the solution by putting it into operation. How does it work in practise? If it doesn't work, discard it and try another. Give each solution a fair chance, but don't hang on to one when it is clear that it won't resolve the conflict.

Perhaps Julia might go out without Raul once to try it out. How was it? Did her friends think there was something wrong with her relationship with Raul? Did she feel guilty? Did she enjoy herself? How did Raul feel? Did he feel jealous? Did he feel lonely or abandoned?

Evaluate the Solution

Did the solution help resolve the conflict? Is the situation better now than it was before the solution was put into operation? Share your feelings and evaluations of the solution.

Raul and Julia now need to share their perceptions of this possible solution. Would they be comfortable with this solution on a monthly basis? Is the solution worth the costs that each will pay? Are the costs and the rewards about evenly distributed? Might other solutions be more effective?