Conflict Management
_____

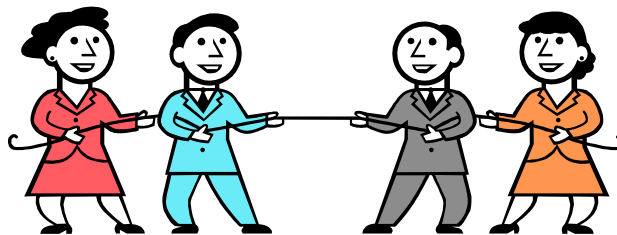## 1.   DEFINITION OF CONFLICT

> *Conflict is an **expressed struggle** between at least **two interdependent parties** who **perceive incompatible goals**, **scarce rewards**, and **interference** from **the other party** in **achieving their goals**.*
>
> *Joyce L. Hocker & William W.*
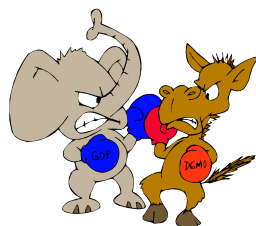> *Wilmot, Interpersonal Conflict*

1.1   Elements of Conflict

There are **five** elements of conflict.

1.1.1   Expressed Struggle

- It is through <u>communicative behaviour</u> that conflict is recognised, expressed, experienced and managed.

- Conflict is often identified when one party <u>openly disagrees</u> with the other.

_____

- Sometimes an interpersonal struggle is expressed by **avoidance.**

  Example:

  Two friends may both be avoiding each other and are aware that they are engaging in avoidance because both think, "I don't want to see him for a few days because of what he did."

1.1.2   Perceived Incompatible Goals

Opposing goals are a fact of life.

Consider the following situation:

The head cashier of a company says, "All our problems would be solved if we could just get some carpet, since everyone's feet get tired - we're the ones who have to stand up all day. But management won't spend a cent on us."

-Staff goal: Carpet
-Management goal: No carpet/ No additional expenditure.

Head cashier continues, "No one notices when we do good work. The 'high-ups' only notice when queues are long and mistakes are made!"

She then says, "How about some compliments once in a while? No one says anything nice. They don't even know we're here."

Both goals are real:
- carpets
- self-esteem

Not all goals are incompatible. Some are actually compatible and achievable.

Carpet VS no carpet is an *Incompatible* **goal**.
Increase in self-esteem VS No recognition given is an *Achievable* **goal**

While the carpet VS no carpet goal may be incompatible with the management's desire, the self-esteem goal may be compatible and achievable.

- Sometimes, we witness people who are **absolutely convinced** that they have **opposing goals** i.e. they cannot agree on anything to pursue together

- However, if they were to **re-frame their goals** (put them in a different context) they may possibly agree.

1.1.3   Perceived Scarce Rewards

When rewards are perceived as scarce, an expressed struggle may be initiated.
Some rewards that are <u>scarce</u> or <u>seen as scarce</u> are:
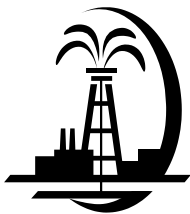
Love	Promotion	Jobs	Respect

Positions	Care	Money	Land

Oil	Esteem

More examples of scarce rewards

a)   Close friends often think that if their best friend likes someone else too, then the <u>supply of affection</u> available to the original friend will diminish.

This may or may not be so, but the perception that <u>affection</u> is scarce may well create <u>genuine conflict</u> between the friends.

b)   Often, children fight with one another over the perceived scarcity of their <u>teacher's attention</u>. Or they fight with the teacher, resulting in a gain of that resource - attention. The child would rather get <u>negative attention</u> than none at all.
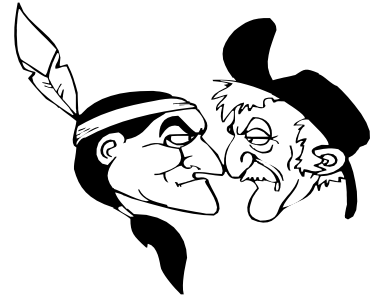
Interpersonal Struggles

In interpersonal struggles two rewards often perceived as scarce are:

- Power: "She always gets her way."
  (She has more **power** than I do.)

- Self-esteem: "He is so sarcastic; I can't stand him."
  (He interferes with my **self-esteem** when I'm around him.)

1.1.4 Interference

Conflict occurs when

- **conditions** identified so far are present

-Expressed struggle
-Incompatible goals
-Scarce rewards

- the parties **interfere** with one another's goal attainment

a) If you refuse to co-operate with your roommate …
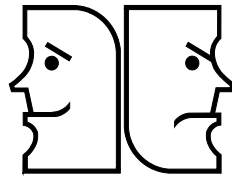b) If your parents do not send you the money you are expecting

Interference

- clarifies for the conflicting parties that the <u>conflict is engaged</u>.

- exists because we are <u>interdependent on one another</u>.

1.1.5 Interdependence

> *A person who is not dependent upon another, i.e., who has no special interest in what the other does - has no conflict with that other person.*
>
> *Braiker & Kelley*

- Conflicting parties engage in an expressed struggle and interfere with one another because they are <u>interdependent</u>.
- Each person's choices affect the other because **conflict is a mutual activity**. [People are seldom totally opposed to each other.]
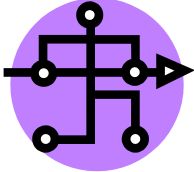
2. TYPES OF CONFLICT

Conflicts
- arise when <u>opinions, values, expectations or needs differ</u>.
- may be **Positive / Constructive** [Conflict which produces positive / constructive results encourages change or allows for clarification of ideas.]
- may be **Negative / Destructive** [Conflict that is negative / destructive / avoided or continual does not encourage communication and carries with it resentment and stress.]
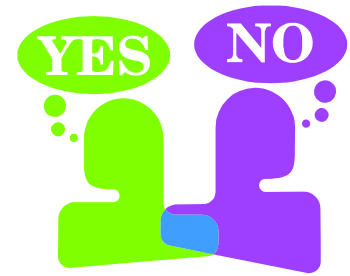- depend on <u>how they are managed</u>.

Both constructive conflict and destructive conflict can be classified into <u>four types</u>. They are:

Internal Conflict	**External Conflict**
- Within the individual - Needs not met - Unable to accept a particular experience or feeling the situation generates - Caused by internal emotions 	 - Between people - Can cause incidents with others - Misunderstandings and bad feelings - Uncomfortable with person(s) concerned
Realistic Conflict	**Unrealistic Conflict**
    - Can be resolved if parties are willing - Can produce positive results - Acknowledges opposing interests/needs - Realistic conflict management may lead to better relationships	- Cannot be resolved since parties are not open to change - No room for negotiation - Based on differences in values and attitudes - Arises from ignorance, traditions and prejudice

3.   APPROACHES TO CONFLICT

Many people regard conflict as a battle to win or a situation to avoid. They want neither to enter into what they consider a negative encounter nor to be regarded in a negative light. They are therefore ill prepared to deal with conflicts.

Engaging in conflict can have positive effects on relationships and organisations.

- Conflict fosters an awareness that problems exist.
- Conflict raises awareness of what is important to individuals.
- Discussing conflicting views can lead to better solutions and clarifications of important problems and issues.
- Challenging old assumptions can lead to changes in outdated practices and processes.
- Conflict leads to authentic communication – helps people to "be real", for example, it motivates them to participate.
- Conflicts helps individuals develop understanding and learn how to recognise and benefit from their differences.

Conflict becomes destructive when it hampers productivity, lowers morale, causes more and continued conflicts and causes inappropriate behaviours.

Think through this…

While the term conflict generally is associated with negative encounters, conflict itself is neither inherently good nor inherently bad. If the conflict is not the problem, then when do you think conflict becomes a problem?

The conflict isn't the problem – it is when conflict is poorly managed that is the problem.

---

4   WAYS OF MANAGING CONFLICT

The term *conflict management* implies that conflict is not an "on" or "off" phenomenon. Some conflicts are enduring and the best we can hope for is to manage the level and manifestation of conflict – to sustain a good working relationship free from negative behaviours or violence. Conflict-handling behaviour is not a static procedure. It is a process that requires flexibility and continual evaluation to be truly productive and effective.

Fundamental to understanding conflict is understanding communication. An interpersonal approach to conflict management focuses on the communicative exchanges that make up the conflict episode. Communication behaviour is at the root of both creating and managing conflict. Communication and conflict are related in the following ways:
- Communication *creates* conflict.
- Communication *reflects* conflict.
- Communication is the *vehicle* for the destructive or productive management of conflict.

To handle conflicts more productively, we can consider the following five 'A's which integrate both conflict theory and interpersonal communication skills:
- **A.   Assessment**
- **B.   Acknowledgement**
- **C.   Attitude**
- **D.   Action**
- **E.   Analysis**

4.1   ASSESSMENT

During this initial stage, allow yourself time to calm and to evaluate the situation.

Think through this…

In pairs, discuss what other factors you may need to do during the initial assessment stage? List them below.

a.   You need to determine the true source of the conflict and gather appropriate information or documentation.
b.   Assess the points you are willing or unwilling to compromise on and what the other party wants.
c.   Make a preliminary determination of the appropriate conflict-handling behaviour for the situation, for the relationship, and for the environment.

4.1.1   Communication styles of conflict-handling behaviour

Everyone uses, to some degree, five styles when dealing with conflict. Research on conflict management styles has found that each of us tends to use one or two of the following five styles more than the others.

The five conflict-handling styles that one can use when dealing with conflict are
a.   Avoiding
b.   Accommodating
c.   Competing
d.   Compromising
e.   Collaborating

Let's examine each style. Animals are associated with each style to help you remember the differences among the styles.
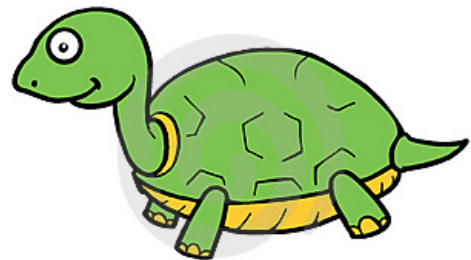
(a)   Avoiding

When individuals avoid conflict, they often withdraw and detach themselves from the issue. They are not willing to assert their own wants nor do they want to help others get what they want. A person choosing the avoiding style might say *"you decide and leave me out of it."*

We often avoid when we don't want to get involved or we decide it's not worth the effort to pursue. It's important to "pick your battles" since they can't all be fought and won. Avoiding is an appropriate conflict-handling style to use if you are too busy with more important concerns and if your relationship with the other party is unimportant.

However, if either the issue or the relationship between the parties is important, then avoidance is a poor strategy.

A turtle is symbol of the avoiding style because it can avoid everything by pulling its head and legs into its shell to get away from everyone.

(b)   Accommodating

When you accommodate others in order to avoid conflict, you will do whatever you can to help the other person get what he wants, often to your own detriment. You give in to demands, even unreasonable ones, to prevent disagreements. Accommodation sacrifices one's goals for the sake of the other person. Accommodators often use phrases like: *"Whatever you want is fine with me."*

However, this style does not generate creative solutions, usually tends to worsen the conflict over time, and causes conflicts within yourself.

A chameleon is a symbol of the accommodating style because it changes its colour to match the colour of its environment. By doing so, the chameleon fits quietly into its environment.

(c)   Competing

For example, when employees compete to "be right," their primary interest is in resolving the conflict *their* way. They have no interest in helping others get what they want. They become very defensive of their position and have difficulty understanding the reasons others don't see things *their* way. Employees may insist that everyone else drop what they're doing so their project can be completed in *their* time frame.

Those who compete often take advantage of those who accommodate others. Competing may be the appropriate style to use if you strongly believe in your ideas and the goal is to win at all costs or there are genuinely scarce resources.
A manager determined to get the biggest budget for his department or a company fending off the competition will feel justified in employing any means necessary to accomplish their respective goals.

A lion can be a symbol of the competitive style. The lion's roar helps the lion to satisfy its interest.

(d)   Compromising

When individuals compromise in order to resolve a conflict, they are willing to "give and take" with others. They may find some middle ground and work out an agreement or solution that is partially satisfactory to both parties, but completely satisfactory to neither.

People choose a compromising style to get past the issue quickly and move on. People who make compromises are likely to say *"let's split the difference"* or *"something is better than nothing."*

A zebra can be a symbol of the compromising style. Its unique look seems to indicate that it didn't care if it was a black horse or a white horse, so it "split the difference" and chose black and white stripes.

(e)   Collaborating

Collaboration occurs when parties cooperatively work together until a mutually agreeable solution is found.

We use collaboration when we want everyone involved to feel "ownership" for the outcome. When individuals collaborate, they are interested in seeing that everyone's wants are met fully. They tend to consider themselves a team, work creatively and are solution-oriented.

Although generally recognised as the most productive conflict-handling behaviour, a collaborating style requires a great deal of energy, creative thinking, empathy and activity, and not all conflicts may warrant such intensity.

A dolphin usually chooses a collaborating style. It uses whistles and clicks to communicate with other dolphins to catch food cooperatively and to summon help.

4.2   ACKNOWLEDGMENT

People make certain assumptions based on their own backgrounds, experiences and culture about how they behave and about how others behave. When those expectations are violated or intruded on, a person experiences discomfort and anxiety. To handle conflicts productively, one should acknowledge and recognise that the other party's perspectives – his beliefs, goals, values and personality traits - may differ from his own.

To illustrate this, consider the manager who always sets "rush" deadlines for his subordinate. To meet the continually "urgent" deadlines, the subordinate would have to submit incomplete materials. To avoid this, he consistently turns in complete and accurate documents – but they are inevitably late. The manager is frustrated by his subordinate's inability to function well under pressure.

A conflict will arise if the manager and subordinate do not acknowledge the following: when the manager demands urgent materials, he does not expect a perfect document; for the subordinate, "crucial and urgent" materials also mean totally correct.

Once both are able to recognise and acknowledge each other's expectations, a frustrating situation for both can be turned into a productive relationship.

4.3   ATTITUDE

Simply acknowledging another person's beliefs, goals and values does not necessarily imply that one's attitude toward the other party will be conducive to dealing with the problem. To deal effectively with others, it is essential to suspend stereotyped assumptions and to enter a communication encounter with an open-minded attitude.

Individuals develop perceptions about themselves, form opinions about others and very often attribute a trait to others based on our own assumptions even when the other party does not possess this characteristic. We often fail to understand fully why the other party is acting or feeling as he does. Our attitude thus becomes an assumption that the other individual is being unreasonable in contrast to our own reasonable actions.

People are also often unaware of how their own behaviour is perceived and interpreted by others. Since constructive conflict management requires open and honest communication, one's attitude toward the other party should include monitoring one's own behaviour so that verbal behaviour is consistent with what is being communicated non-verbally.

4.4   ACTION

The ultimate aim of conflict management is to take productive action toward achieving one's goals. This step encompasses interpersonal communication skills, for it is through communication that we are able to effect conflict management. Accurate communication, appropriate verbal and non-verbal behaviour, flexibility of communication style, and the ability to keep the channels of communication open reflect in part aspects of productive action.

Let's now look at some of the following communicative strategies for a supportive communicative climate conducive to conflict management:

4.4.1   Listen Well

When disagreements emerge, we have the natural need to want to explain our side first. After all, we reason, if they understand our perspective, they will come to the same conclusions as we did. In handling of disagreements, "Seek first to understand, then to be understood". This principle was introduced by Steven Covey, in *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. If we encourage others to explain their side first, they will be more apt to listen to ours.

At this point, we can put our needs aside, try to truly listen, and say, "So, help me understand what your concerns are regarding…"

It is easy to hear without listening. Listening is much more than being quiet so we can have our turn. It involves a real effort to understand another person's perspective.

As we are listening to the other party during a disagreement, we should resist the tendency to interrupt with objections no matter how unfounded some of the comments may be, or to bring up our viewpoints and concerns.

Instead of telling someone that we *understand*, we can be much more effective by revealing exactly w*hat it is that we understand*. Hence, it is necessary not only to understand, but for the other person to *feel understood*. Only then can we begin to explain our perspective and expect to be fully listened to.

4.4.2 Demonstrate empathy

To show empathy, individuals can provide and solicit feedback through questioning, paraphrasing and role reversal.

- **Questioning**

Hostile and accusatory questions such as *"Don't you know that this is the wrong procedure?"* are likely to create defensiveness

---

Think through this…

Give two examples of appropriate and more productive questions that can be asked during a conflict.

"If I understand you correctly, you're upset with my tone of voice"
"Do you feel that there is only one way to resolve this dispute?"

- Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing demonstrates a willingness to attend to and to acknowledge the concerns of others.

Think through this…

If someone says to you: *"You never let me finish what I'm saying!"*, how do you think you can paraphrase this statement and respond to reflect that you understand the message and acknowledge his concerns?

" <u>If I understand you correctly, you are upset because you feel I interrupt you too much</u> " or
" <u>Do you feel that I interrupt you too often?</u> "

- Role Reversal
It is important for individuals in a conflict to be able to express their own perceptions and ideas regarding the nature of their differences. In role reversal, an individual assumes the role of the other party and tries to articulate the other individual's viewpoint, using that person's communication style.

For example, two members of a management team who staunchly disagree on how to reorganise their unit may be requested to enact their differences in the role of the other. Similarly, a couple experiencing marital difficulty may be asked to assume each other's role and to express in the role of the spouse why they feel they cannot communicate. As role reversal enables individuals to see clearly each other's ideas, views, and feelings, it provides a powerful process for clarifying differences when misunderstandings or false expectations are the source of disagreements.

4.4.3 Watch your verbal communication (language style)

Several types of statements inhibit the flow of ideas between individuals.

- Avoid overly vague or broad statements
Overly vague or broad statements such as, *"You are inconsiderate."* do little to facilitate mutual understanding. Specific issues, or events, and what motivated each to act in certain ways, may be more useful.

- Avoid ridicule and exaggerations

Individuals involved in conflict situations often try to ridicule the other party by distorting or exaggerating what has been said. Exaggerations are often employed to substantiate claims. For example, an employee may inaccurately mirror a comment, such as, *"So you are telling me you never want me to…"* or, *"I get it, you think you are the only one who…"* or, *"It seems that nowadays you are always…."* An employee who accuses her colleague of *"always"* making mistakes in the monthly sales reports or of *"never"* being on time for meetings opens himself up to criticism unless, of course, literally every report submitted contains mistakes and the colleague has never been punctual.

- Avoid threatening statements

Threatening statements present a barrier to creating a supportive communication environment, such as *"If you don't meet this deadline, your performance appraisal will be affected."* A far more effective compliance-gaining strategy is to explain clearly the rationale for certain behaviours and the implications a lack of cooperation engenders. For example, the manager expresses reservations about a subordinate by saying, *"I am concerned that you will not be able to meet the deadline."*

- Avoid hostile and sarcastic remarks

Hostile jokes and sarcastic remarks diminish the ability of the two parties to participate in an honest communication exchange. Statements such as *"That's just the way I am,"* or *"Can't you take a joke?"* contribute to a defensive climate. Consider the remark to a roommate:
"How can you claim to want nice furniture? This place is like a pigsty!"
When individuals are the objects of sarcastic remarks, they must determine the most effective way to address the implicit criticisms especially if the relationship is a valued or necessary one. For example, the roommate may counter the statement regarding the cleanliness of the apartment with a suggestion such as, *"I realise the apartment isn't as clean as we would like. Perhaps we should consider engaging a part-time cleaner."*

4.4.4 Watch your non-verbal communication

Nonverbal signals can influence the degree of conflict by adding an element of bias into the information being sent and received. Nonverbal messages can distort information by appearing to emphasize, understate or contradict the intended meanings. Appropriate facial expressions, eye contact and tone of voice are crucial to productive conflict management. Smiling may indicate that one does not take the conflict seriously, staring may appear to be a challenge, and sounding hesitant may bring sincerity into question. It may be appropriate to dress down for some conflicts and to dress up for others.

4.4.5 Recognise relative power

Consider who has the power to decide and who the one to listen is.

For example, a manager is likely to discourage feedback about a problem if he states, *"I've been with this company long enough to know how to settle this matter."* Similarly, a husband may silence his partner by asserting, *"Listen, I'm the one paying for the trip. I'll decide where we should go."* Both examples reflect attempts to maintain superiority or control in the relationship and contradict a basic assumption about conflict management, i.e., that all parties should be encouraged to interact freely. We should try to satisfy the sum of both their needs and our needs. It does not mean that one of us has to lose if the other is going to win and that differences can only be solved competitively.

4.5 ANALYSIS

Analysis is employed throughout the conflict-management process as part of the assessment, acknowledgement, attitudinal, and action stages. However, analysis in the final stage means that it is important to consider whether

(a)   the concerns of all parties have been articulated and considered;
(b)   the decisions can be implemented quickly and/ or effectively;
(c)   the short- or long-term effects of the solution are viable; and
(d)   the relationship between the conflicting parties has improved.

Conflict participants should consider solutions from both objective and subjective standpoints. The following statements reflect a willingness to remain open to the concerns of both sides:

-     *"We'll try out this new procedure and review its effectiveness in three months."*
-     *"Let's see how the new work schedule will affect morale."*
-     *"Let's meet periodically so that we can adjust the plan if needed."*

A FINAL NOTE

In some conflict situations, however, individuals are unable to manage conflict on their own. When an impasse occurs, conflict participants often resort to third-party intervention. A mediator facilitates communication between the conflict parties and helps them to reach an agreement. If negotiation fails, conflict parties may resort to arbitration as a means to resolve differences. The arbitrator hears both sides of an argument and determines which side is right.

Learning to disagree amicably and work through problems is perhaps one of the most important interpersonal skills we can develop.