Help, Something Is Just Not Right!

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1.1 Subject: Managing Everyday Conflicts

Objective: Unresolved conflicts between individuals and groups destroy "satisfaction and focus" and bring in "dissatisfaction and indifference" within project teams. This paper intends to build awareness and suggest strategies to minimize and manage such "time and energy bleeders".

Scope: Conflict at work is inevitable and even needed for creative team work. However individuals and groups tend to lose time and energy due to unresolved conflicts. Further individuals may show outbursts as if the 'hall is on fire' or take it out as a "road rage" incident much later. They may join the category of silent sufferers enriching the medical community through huge bills for "anxiety, neurosis, blood pressure...and so on as well. The underlying cause is lack of tools and techniques for effective conflict management.

Why and how does the "silent lava of conflict" flow underneath the marbled halls, and carpeted conference rooms? Why do some individuals behave as though the conflicts will disappear if ignored while others attack even minor issues with the same focus and vehemence as if to resolve a world war? These are the critical questions.

Result: Our research (both primary and secondary) gathers the causes and suggests strategies to build the harmony required to resolve every day conflicts.

Business value: Everyday conflicts bleed time and energy. If added back, savings in terms of time and increase in productivity due to harmony at work place and improved energy levels will scale up employee productivity by at least 10-15%.

Key Differentiator: Research involving 300 participants from across industries & countries

1.2 Key Words

Everyday Conflicts, Resolution, Harmony

1.3 Introduction:

As all genuine researchers do, we too started our work by Google searching the word "conflict". 336 million results hit us in just 0.18 seconds. Hiroshima bombing, Israel and Palestine, WTO issues, the results were mind boggling. As these deviated from our objective of finding causes for everyday conflicts at the work place, we decided to stay focused on alternate sources like real life cases and primary research.

In our journey, we came across M/s Sharma & Sharma - a successful catering business. When asked the secret of the long and successful partnership; Mr. Sharma stated: Our partnership is successful because there are no conflicts in our office. The roles and the rules are clear as to who takes what decisions. Mrs. Sharma (the other partner) is responsible for only day to decisions; should they buy a new catering van? Should they declare the bonus? Major areas like the Indo-Pak conflict over Kashmir; whether India must claim ownership on the Moon as the earliest references to the Moon are in ancient Indian epics and so on were under his jurisdiction. Let us admit that such clear cut policies do not exist in the real world of work and office!

Result: Millions of minor and major conflicts occur in business organizations across the world every day bleeding profits due to the loss of productivity, focus and energy.

1.4 Past literature:

Approaching conflict resolution in a rational way is an ancient concept in India. Kautilya (Chanakya) accords importance to "Conflict Resolution" from the perspective of a Ruler in his Artha Shastra (prior to 150 AD). Sanskrit "Subhashitas" speak of conflict resolution techniques. The ancient wisdom of using Sama (placatory attitude), Dana (gifts), Bheda (sowing seeds of dissention), and Danda (using force) to overcome adverse situations and conflicts is well recorded. These may or may not be appropriate now as the way humans live and work has changed over the centuries.

Recent works on conflicts, especially on conflicts at work places occur both in socio-psychological works (Heider, 1958; Deutsch, 1969; Brehmer, 1976; and management works (Guetzkow and Gyr, 1954). De Dreu and Van de Vliert (1997) .Some are of the opinion that constructive conflicts encourage positive outcomes. Conflicts within organizations are often classified the conflicts as- "Task conflicts, Relationship conflicts, and Process conflicts", (Guetzkow and Gyr, 1954: Cosier and Rose, 1977 Amason and Sapienza, 1997, Jehn-1997 among others).

Task or Cognitive conflicts: These are disagreements   regarding the group tasks; **Relationship conflicts** result from inter-personal incompatibilities and **Process conflicts** arise over dividing and delegating responsibilities about how to get the work done.

While Task and Process conflicts may be easier to resolve, *Relationship conflicts are difficult as they can* flow silently underneath and make teams dysfunctional. They are the focus of this research paper. An attempt is made to identify the major sources of such conflict and suggest ways to create a harmonious work environment.

Methodology: Primary research through survey, real life case studies (contributed by our trainees in conflict management and team building modules) and personal experience of authors in their long careers. Secondary research is used to build the context.

Sabcons Research: Sabcons conducted a survey of over 300 persons (on-line and off-line) to test the following hypothesis. The survey is age, country and sector neutral.

Hypothesis-01: **Intrapersonal conflicts** of individuals contribute significantly to **Relationship Conflicts** at the work places.

Hypothesis-02: The most significant cause for daily Relationship Conflicts in the work place is the lack of **Interpersonal skills.** Though others such as Common resources and Diversity issues (Gender, Generational, and Cultural diversities and so on) do contribute to conflicts, they can be overcome using good Interpersonal skills.

1.5 Minor conflicts –Major losses:

Consider the following news: Techie attacks van driver from behind while driving causing serious injuries to five persons. People who knew Anil, the person involved were astounded. "Not possible," they said, "such a quiet and calm man."

Case study-1: Anil was employed with the RIM group of a reputed company. He enjoyed his work but disliked the odd timings, in particular the shift that started at 3.30 am. The pick-up van arrived at 2.45 am and made enough noise to wake up the entire neighborhood. Extremely embarrassed about this, Anil time and again requested the van drivers to minimize the noise. Some did and some did not. Raju, an aggressive young driver, not only did not heed Anil's request but mocked at him "Are you afraid of these old cronies?" he taunted, referring to the elderly neighbors whose opinion seemed to matter to Anil. On the fateful day, Anil simply leaned forward and slapped hard across the young driver's face when he repeatedly taunted Anil not to be so scared. Startled, Raju lost control and rammed in to the sidewalls of the flyover they were crossing.

Result: A good man highly respected for his technical skills triggered an accident that left him and his colleagues seriously injured.

Though not all are so dramatic or tragic, we come across several manifestations of underlying conflicts during the course of our normal work. These derail productivity in teams. The pointer is to identify and resolve such conflicts before they blow the fuse.

Intrapersonal Conflict: From the medical perspective, Intrapersonal conflict may be called as a conflict that occurs solely in the psychological dynamics of the person's own mind. From a layman's point of view it is the struggle between the values we have grown up with, which set our own expectation about our behavior versus the present situation we find ourselves in.

Case Study- 2: Young Pratap holds a PG degree in Computer Science though coming from a family of hoteliers. After a couple of years with an Indian MNC, Pratap quit to start his own web designing company which was washed away in the financial meltdown post the sub prime crisis. Added to this, Pratap's brother who managed the family hotels succumbed to H1N1 leaving him with little choice but to take over the hotel business. Though successful financially, his intra-personal conflict about being a qualified engineer and managing a hotel, resulted in him being continuously at war with himself and unhappy. He felt that others ridiculed him or pitied him even when they did not do so. This perception led to a number of daily altercations and conflicts till he decided to get help. Once he **understood his inner turmoil**, he was able to deal with issues at the work place in a mature way disassociating his inner conflict from his routine job issues.

Result: Most of the daily conflicts toned down. Pratap now applies his engineering skills to make the hotel a better managed place and has opened his web designing business again appointing third parties to carry the work forward.

### 1.5.1 Value systems and Intrapersonal conflicts:

Many Indian working mothers live with a constant feeling of guilt. The deep rooted value that mothers should be there to take care of their children that is all pervasive in our society makes them feel quite guilty about their careers leading to intrapersonal conflicts. Other such **value system binders** are: one should be modest and wait for recognition to come their way (not seek it out), Emotions should not be expressed, staying late at work is a sign of commitment," and so on. Such values create intrapersonal conflicts and may drive people to perceptual errors and actions that lead them in to interpersonal conflicts.

1.5.2 Interpersonal skills and Conflicts at the Work place:

Case study-3: XYZ Ltd started a new process of "Remote Infrastructure Management (RIM)" a year ago with a young and brilliant team. When the team lead resigned unexpectedly, Ram (27) with four years of experience in another process was posted as the team lead to RIM as the company policy mandated at least two years within the company to become a team lead and none in RIM had that experience. Ram walked in to the office and said "Hi, guys, I understand that none of you are qualified to become a team-lead, so here I am!" with a huge grin. The entire team went quite. No one listened further to his introductory words.

Going forward, Ram with his poor interpersonal skills never understood why no one seemed to get along with him. Though not vocalized, the tension was palpable. Finally, the company shifted him and posted James. James, a Russian from the client's side was 45 years of age with two years experience in this company and spoke broken English. The RIM team was poised for another battle now. They thought that James with his age and language issues will be a disaster. Though in broken English, James had this to say- "Guys, the only reason I am here is the two year experience I have in your company. You people know your RIM. Soon it will be two years for all of you and you will be team-leads". Clearly, his interpersonal skills helped him to understand emotions and overcome a tough situation. The team now takes pride in solving problems at their level and ensuring that their team performed. Often called "Uncle James", the Russian team lead has a happy and engaged team.

Our survey substantiates the above case wherein our respondents felt that good interpersonal skills were more important; if not more than technical skills.
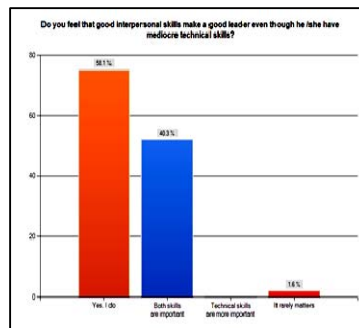
Sabcons Research:
Graph 1-Interpersonal skills Vs Technical skills
58.1% -prefer a leader with   better Interpersonal skills   even if the technical skills are mediocre. 40.3% -feel both skills are important.

1.6% - feel it rarely matters   0%- feel that technical skills   are more important!

1.5.3 Graph-2: Role of emotions in conflicts

89% of respondents agreed that conflict situations involved emotions in one way or the other. Only 11% felt that emotions did not matter.

Emotions are suppressed	33.9%
Emotions are expressed (appropriately)	26.8%
Emotional outbursts occur	28.3%
Emotions have no role	11%

This is critical data as Relationship conflicts are driven by emotions resulting in blocked communication. Suppression or emotional outbursts are patterns based on previous experiences right from childhood, values both taught and learnt and belief systems that are generated thereon.
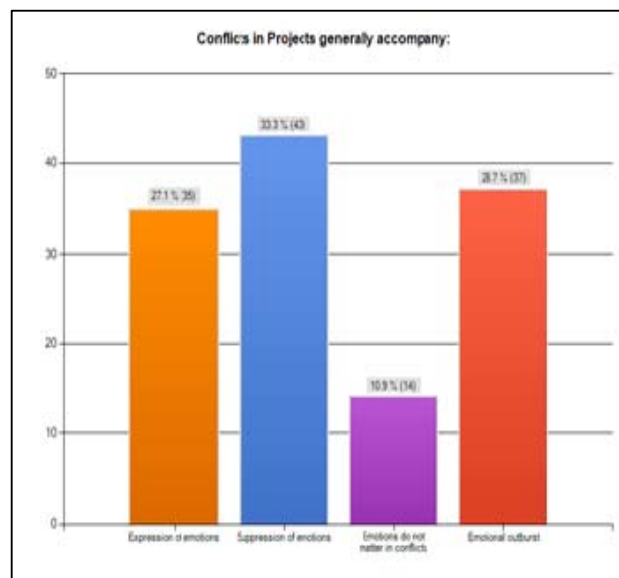
Strategies to minimize   conflicts in work and life:

Our research survey and case studies indicate that Relationship conflicts occur and escalate mainly due to lack of Interpersonal skills. Survey questions were formulated to identify other sources of conflict such as common resources, diversity issues as well. The conclusion drawn is that all these issues can be resolved by good interpersonal skills, gracious and polite behavior and respecting the other person's feelings and emotions. Our own intrapersonal conflicts drive us to behaviors that lead to Relationship conflicts as well. These issues may be addressed at Individual, Team and Organizational levels as follows to resolve conflicts.

### 1.5.4 Individual level strategy: I- ACT Model:

Individuals can adopt the I-ACT model as follows to resolve Relationship conflicts

1.5.5 I- Introspect:

- How have I contributed to the conflict? Have I communicated in the right manner?

- Am I alienating others out due to groupism based on language / education?

- Am I correct in my perceptions about others? What are the facts and figures?

- Are my intrapersonal conflicts and values affecting my moods, behavior and work relations?

A-Acknowledgements: Acknowledging involves taking responsibility and is difficult. Most refuse to believe that they too contribute to the conflict. This would involve a pause to take a proactive stance wherein underlying emotions of either party are addressed. Emotional baggage that accompanies conflict situations must be acknowledged and dealt with as top priority.

C-Communication: The first victim of conflict is communication. When communication suffers, conflicts escalate and a vicious circle is created. Opening communication channels is critical but not easy. Survey results reiterated this as 83% of people agreed that conflicts can be cleared only after open and clear communication. Sensing the other person's emotions and dealing with them appropriately using good Interpersonal communication skills forms the core of the conflict resolution process.

Most conflicts settle down:
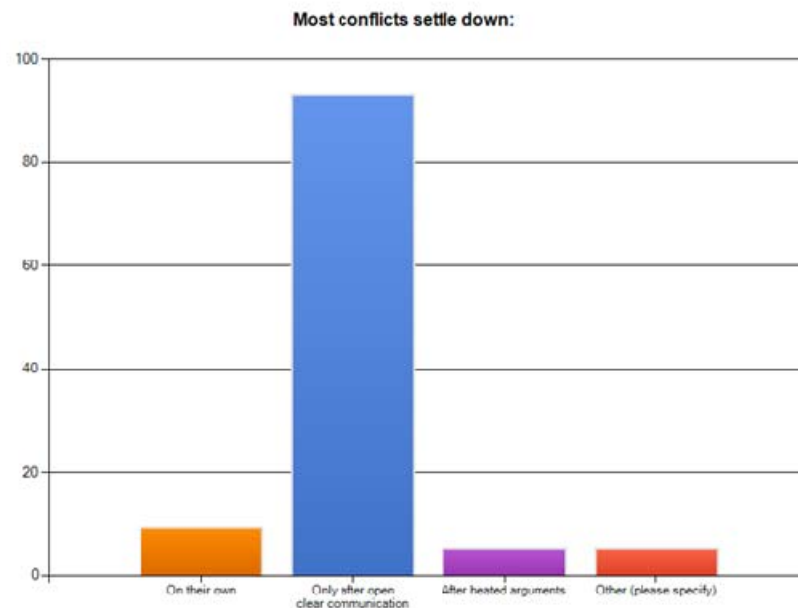
T-Training: Proactively seeking out training to become better equipped with Interpersonal skills, building awareness about conflict management patterns and using the appropriate technique is essential as these skills do not come naturally to many. As shown elsewhere, no one subscribes (0% response) to the view that persons with good technical skills alone can make good leaders.

1.5.6 Different people-Different strategy:

It is simplistic to say that individuals can resolve conflicts just by modifying own actions as the other party too needs to be involved in an appropriate way. In dealing with conflict behaviors one needs to understand that people are different. Insights can be gained using various personality models such as DISC[1] , Merrill and Reid model[2]. Whole Brain Business of Ned Herman[3], Myers-Briggs type indicator [4] and so on. 4-Quadrant Personality Models-The Quick Way to Improve Team Communications by Steve Wille[5] makes interesting and insightful reading about such models.

1.5.7 Depending on their personality, people either "Fight" or take "Flight" when conflicts occur.

Case Study – 4: Raj wanted the best for himself and struggled to put in all the goodies into his performance basket. Meeting deadlines, maintaining personal quality at work, gaining new knowledge was what he strived for unrelentingly. However, the slightest negative feedback from his manager sent him into a cocoon. It was his counselor who made him realize that it is his pattern of getting extremely hurt at the slightest reprimand, with the feeling that the manager does not like him or care for him that had prevented him from Seeing Eye to eye with his manager / team members. What Raj exhibited in this case study is a typical flight response.

PMBOK indicates that there are different ways of dealing with conflicts in different situations from withdrawal, accommodating, compromising and forcing to collaborating, and though it appears that collaborating is the ideal way to deal with situations; all other modes are indeed needed as the situation demands. However, people are more or less stuck to one default way of handling conflicts .This more often than not happens at the subconscious level and the individual may not even be aware of his/her pattern. Managers / team leads can bring out these patterns and address them as a team during team meetings handling the issue with sensitivity and care.

1.5.8 Dealing with Fight and Flight behavior in conflicts:

In conflict resolution, "Fight" and "Flight" behaviors need to be addressed differently as follows as people involved are different.

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[1] *DISC* - American Management Association, Center for Applied Research

[2] David Merrill and Roger Reid: Personal Styles and Effective Performance

[3] Herman Ned-The whole brain business book

[4] Katharine Cook Briggs and Isabel Briggs Myers.

[5] Copyright © 2004 Steven Wille http://www.toughteams.com/articles/4-quadrant.htm

1.5.9 LIKE –Response for Flight behavior:

In dealing with Flight behavior, 'LIKE', (as shown below) works well:

* **L**isten: carefully to the feelings expressed

* **I**nvolve: the other by showing understanding of their concerns

* **K**now: that the concerns can be resolved by exploring suggestions together

* **E**xplain: to get them involved in recognizing / solving the problem for what it actually is.

1.5.10 SOAR –Response for Fight behavior:

In dealing with **Flight** behaviors what is recommended is applying '**SOAR**':

* **S**upport: Encourage them to share their feelings

* **O**penness: Help them to think through by creating nonjudgmental atmosphere

* **A**ssurance: That it is ok to speak up

* **R**educed Risk: of flight behavior by facilitating some form of action steps

1.5.11 Team level strategies:

* **Team development stage:** Groupism based on language, qualification, generation etc in the storming stage of team formation lead to conflicts based on real or perceived favoritism. Managers must put up their antennae and sense these undercurrents to prevent them from causing Relationship conflicts that come in the way of reaching project goals. In the survey, 46% voted for language as the basis of barriers and groupism; 31% for qualification and 17% for age.

* Facilitate team discussions to bring out feelings of team members and paraphrase them for deeper understanding; and this is perhaps as important as technical discussions.

* Create an atmosphere of open, free communication and trust where team members can share their issues and concerns. Conflicts between individuals may be driven by own deep rooted personal emotional baggage but may appear to be driven by each other's behavior. For example in the movie 'Chak De India', though two team members appear to be fighting with each other for getting the maximum goals, a confrontation which opens communication about their unproductive behaviors clarifies that one of them is fighting for her own emotional needs rather than against the other team member. This paves the way for reconciliation.

* Where needed, members may agree to disagree, but stay focused and committed when it comes to achieving team goals

1.5.12 Organizational level strategies:

* **Interpersonal skill training:** With a focus on early conflict identification and tools and techniques of conflict management. Good behavior sensitive to other people's feeling and emotions can overcome all other challenges including diversity issues.

* **Ground rules:** Bad behavior is a precursor to conflicts. There should be zero tolerance for bad behavior. Commonly called as harassment, it manifests as

sarcasm, shouting, ridiculing, intimidating, implied or open threats .Organizations must create simple remedies by collecting information about bad behavior through anonymous bulletin board postings and suggestion boxes and taking appropriate action.

✦ **Alternate Redressal Forums**: can be used to provide relief to employees.

✦ **Corporate Counselors:** Gymnasiums and sports facilities take care of physical health only. Counselors can help vent out feelings caused by   stress due to work pressures, anxieties, daily conflicts and lack of work-life balance and put things in perspective.

Conclusion: Relationship conflicts are inevitable at work places. They have to be resolved and proactively where feasible before they escalate to cause nonproductive behaviors**. Interpersonal skills are needed at all** levels and are 'must have skills' as one moves up the ladder. The ability to manage differences constructively is a critical factor for professional success. The benefits add to the organization's bottom line. Moreover, tools and techniques acquired to work through interpersonal differences lead to both personal as well as professional well being. The **I-ACT model** can pave way to become balanced individuals and good team players. Organizations too will see productivity going up when high value is placed on managing Relationship conflicts effectively.

1.5.13 References:

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1.6 Author Profile:

Sabita Prasad: to understand why people behave the way they do is Sabita's forte. A coach, counselor and trainer on human behavior, she wears many hats. Her unique approach blends the best of western psychology and eastern philosophy. In her interaction with people from all over the world, she has empowered them – both professionally and personally.

Sabita is also a visiting consultant at Arogyadhama, a holistic yoga healing centre. Her articles on human behavior have been published in major newspapers. Sabita holds double masters in Science and has graduated with a Gold Medal in Counseling Psychotherapy.

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