# CREATIVE CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN ORGANIZATIONS

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### Abstract

In our relationships at our workplaces, we are involved in all kinds of actions, decisions, and changes that may threaten or confuse others. If these fears and misunderstandings are not quickly resolved, tension will mount and conflict will develop. Conflict itself can be positive and the idea that conflict is bad is very debilitating to organizations because it prevents growth, change, and new directions. It is not only possible but also undesirable to eliminate all conflict in an organization. However, understanding the dynamics taking place in conflict and knowing how to manage it can provide rich opportunities for organizational effectiveness.

Organizational Conflict is a natural by-product of increased societal and organizational complexity. The average community, school, church and organization these days, are composed of people from many different backgrounds, cultures, religions, races, and value systems. These differing viewpoints and behavior increase the likelihood of misunderstandings that in turn lead to conflicts. Organizational conflict has therefore become one of the manager's greatest managerial plaques.

The implication of all of this is that, it is essential that managers understand conflict and how to manage it successfully. If managers do not understand the dynamics taking place in conflict, they will tend to be "reactors" to whatever is happening in this process. Instead of turning it into a process for problem-solving, positive change, new goals, and relationship building.

Conflict management is one of the skills that enable good interpersonal relations among colleagues at work. Although essential when dealing both with superiors and subordinates, conflict management is particularly useful for negotiating and resolving disagreements among peers. Managers with this competence handle difficult people and tense situations with diplomacy and tact, spot potential conflict, bring disagreements into the open, encourage debate and open discussion, and orchestrate win-win solutions. Meaningful work conflict is therefore a cornerstone in healthy, successful organizations.

This article addresses this vital subject of conflict management with a practical approach. The article first introduces the dynamics of conflict; it identifies the types of conflict that can erupt in an organization and how to manage them successfully. First the article defines conflict and identifies some conflict pollutants that are found in organizations. Other sections of the article identify different types of conflict that usually occurs in organizations and then suggests practical approaches in dealing with these conflicts.

### Conflict Management Defined

"Conflict is a situation in which two or more human beings desire goals which they perceive as being attainable by one or the other but not both. (Stagner,1967)

"Conflict occurs anytime there is a disturbance in the equilibrium and security of a protective environment.

"Conflict arises when the actions of one party threaten the value, goals or behaviors of another party.

"Conflict is two or more objects aggressively trying to occupy the same space at the same time... two persons trying to have his 'own way' regarding an important decision....'

## Inevitability of Conflict

Wherever choices exist there is potential for disagreement. Thus all vital families have conflicts, as do all vital corporations, schools, colleges, and hospitals. Where there are creative, excited people, conflict arises. The challenge is to keep these conflicts open and public so that the team can take responsibility for resolving them. Such differences, when handled properly, can result in richer, more effective, creative solutions and interaction (Drolet, 1992) found that conflict are necessary to satisfaction with an organization's operating system. The stronger the norms that support productive conflict, the higher the level of satisfaction.. But, it is difficult to consistently turn differences into opportunities. When disagreement is poorly dealt with, the outcome can be *contention.* Contention creates a sense of psychological distance between people, such as feelings of dislike, bitter antagonism, competition, alienation, and disregard.

## Role of Conflict

It is important that manages are not put off by the negative connotations of conflict. Rather they should accept conflict as a necessary and productive element in organizational growth. This is because institutions and individuals that lack stress fail to progress. While it may not feel good, conflict provides rich opportunities for organizations to grow. One of the assumptions that undergirds this premise about conflict is that human beings are problem-seeking animals who need conflict to survive. Human beings need challenges and problems to enrich their lives. Problems are the spice that enriches our lives.

Conflicts can lead to creative solutions to problems, leadership change that reduces frustration and conflict, the raising of morale, a more positive environment and a more efficient and organized company, and a more thorough study of options and better decisions and direction. When people can disagree with each other and lobby for different ideas, your organization is healthier.

Conflicts provide rich opportunities for organizational growth. Conflict is necessary for effective problem solving and interpersonal relationships.

## Types of Conflict

Harvey and Drolet (1994), put conflict into two domains; Conflict Pollutants and Conflict Types.

## Conflict pollutants

Marc Roberts (1982), defines conflict pollutants as those factors that clog and choke the climate for effective conflict management. They are elements that are not inherent in the conflict itself, but that distract from and complicate the resolution process. These pollutants need to be understood and cleaned out, otherwise, the conflict will be too toxic to resolve. Marc Roberts identifies nine (9) conflict pollutants that are prevalent in group and organizational settings.

### Preference above Principles.

This is simply a contest over style and over choice of a way to proceed. Preferences are options, none of which are imperative. Principles are truths and disregarding them carries important consequences. Too often, organizational conflicts arise over preferences, not principles of management. Disputes over preferences seldom achieve the goals of the organization. They are simply skirmishes about style. And a fight over preference pollute the climate.

### Expecting Too Much

This can be referred to as overblown expectations. Change takes place but when we expect too much too quickly, we create a climate for failure. Organizations and

individuals that expect too much of themselves create a climate in which unproductive conflicts flourish. In change theory, we talk of "small wins" (Harvey, 1990). It is important to allow people to change in small increments.

### Poor Feedback Skills
Effective feed back skills enable people to hear what you have to say and to do something about a situation. Keeping things positive and proactive is one key to reducing conflict. Giving and receiving feedback requires courage, skill, understanding, and respect for self and others. Effective Feedback skills should describe behaviors, provide direction, and avoid attacking the person individually. When you use effective feedback skills, you increase the chances that your message will be heard and acted upon. You decrease the chances that side conflicts will emerge over the style of your message, distracting attention from the content.

### Negativism and Joylessness
Joyful environments are more productive than joyless ones. A highly joyless environment breeds conflict. Keeping things positive and proactive is the key to reducing conflict

### Conflict Traps
There are four major conflict traps; health, money, time and clutter. It is argued that people who feel unhealthy are more likely to engage in conflict than others. People experiencing money problems are more likely to fight than others. People who have, or think they have more to do than time permits are more likely to experience conflict than others. And people in small, cluttered environment (a feeling of their surroundings physically closing in on them) are more likely to look for conflicts. All of these are conflict traps because the conflicts that ensue are not over the real issues, but side issues. Avoiding these traps, or at east acknowledging them openly, reduces unproductive conflict.

### Mushroom Syndrome
Small conflicts that are left unresolved, unspoken of and unacknowledged, often fester

and grow like mushrooms and thrive in the dark. They grow and become very large and unmanageable.

### Poor Problem Ownership
The more competent we are, the more our ego makes us think we can solve everyone else's problems When we try to solve someone else's problems, we do two perilous things. First, we rob the other person of the opportunity to grow by solving his or her own problem. Second, you increase the chances that you will become an actor in the conflict yourself. You can play the role of a consultant in helping others but not as a savior.

### Solving before Listening
We sometimes try to solve problems or conflicts before we have all the relevant information. We hear the surface issue and deliver an immediate response. To solve conflict effectively we need to understand the problem and know the range of solutions and their consequences.

### Scarcity mentality
Many people see life as a finite pie; if someone gets a big piece of the pie, it means less for everybody else. People with a scarcity mentality have a hard time sharing recognition, credit, power, or profit. They have a tough time being genuinely happy for the success of other people. This phenomenon results in conflict, tension and discomfort.

## Conflict Types.
The second component of conflict management identifies five types of conflicts.

### Value conflicts
Value conflicts are struggles over beliefs, tenets, or principles. They often evolve convictions held on faith, independent of evidence or logic. Value conflicts are not readily resolved. In most cases they cannot be resolved. Differing parties simply learn to coexist within an understanding or appreciation of their fundamental differences.

### Tangible conflicts

Conflicts arising over elements that can be measured, divided, counted, or shared. Money is a classic area of tangible conflict. We do not have money to do everything we want, so we conflict over priorities on spending. Other tangible conflicts may concern time, facilities, personnel, benefits and the like. Tangible conflicts tend to fall in the resource domain, and, in reality, are more readily resolved than the other types.

### Interpersonal conflicts

These types of conflicts arise from feelings developed from interpersonal relationships. "I've never liked you," or "I've never liked that quality in you", are a common mental script. Interpersonal conflicts arise because of different perspectives about other people, especially minority groups or people who in other ways are different from ourselves. These differences might be on the basis of race, class, background, education, politics, temperament and religion. Our biases and prejudices are capable of producing very strong feelings and divisions between people. Interpersonal conflicts are very common in all organizations and is the second most difficult to resolve.

### Territorial conflicts

Either someone is trying to infringe on or take away part of another's territory, or two or more parties are disputing the same territory. The territory threatened may be physical, psychological, or spiritual. These are of two kinds- boundary penetration and boundary expansion. Boundary penetration can take many forms. You believe you have a certain territory, area or role that is being violated by someone. For instance, you think it is your job to make decisions about monetary expenditure and later find out that someone else has made that decision without your consent and knowledge. This referred to as penetration.

Again, boundary penetration occurs when two or more parties propose different goals or solutions that all cannot be accepted or put into action at the same time. In addition, when one party seeks to impose its decisions and goals on another party territorial conflict occurs. When this happens, the decisions of the stronger or more persistent party blocks the fulfillment of the aspirations of the other party. Boundary penetrations are among the most common conflicts.

The second kind of conflict in this category is *boundary expansion*. This is when one party is expecting the other party to step in and assist under certain circumstances and the expected party does not recognized it as his or her responsibility. When both of these boundary conflicts are left unresolved, they frequently lead to interpersonal conflicts.

### Perceptual Conflicts

They are the easiest to resolve. They revolve around mutual misunderstanding. Perceptual conflict evolve out of failure to communicate or in adequate information.

### Conflict Resolution strategy

Once you know the type of conflict you face, you need to determine an appropriate strategy. We propose some basic conflict resolution strategies.

### Problem Solving

This is the most-used strategy for managing and resolving conflicts. Problem solving starts with the assumption that you must carefully define the nature of the problem, search for an array of solutions through a variety of data-gathering approaches and through a consensus, before choosing a mutually acceptable alternative. This approach involves four (4) steps:

a. ***Separate the people from the problem.*** Avoid defining the situation as the test of wills. Focus instead on working side by side on a common goal-resolving the issues at hand. Build trust to defuse strong emotions and to keep conflict from escalating.

b. ***Focus on interests, not positions.*** A negotiating position should not concentrate on the positions of the parties, but a common interest of the organization.

*Expansions of resources*-When legitimate demands are greater the resources at hand, simply expand or enhance the resources. This is a delightful, satisfying approach in resource-rich environments. In resource scarce times, there may be creative alternatives, entrepreneurial solutions, that do not add resources per se, but recreate their use to derive greater benefit for more people.

*Superordinate Goal*- this is a strategy that appeals to a higher order belief or value. These are values, beliefs or goals that overarch the conflict of the moment. This strategy is particularly effective in value conflicts when:
a.  There are higher values than those under dispute
b.  All parties in the dispute have a commonly held higher value

*Interdependence Analysis*- This works much like Superordinate Goal, the appeal is to a higher value; interdependence analysis builds on the mutual need we have for one another. For example the need for one another.

*Compromise*- this is one of the more common approaches to conflict management. You give up half a loaf, I'll give up half a loaf, and we will be even. This is the theory of mutual deprivation-one agrees as long as the other party is equally deprived. This strategy works well as long as the dispute entails moderately important goals. On the other hand if the conflict involves a critical organizational issue, compromise gives up too much.

Compromise assumes equal power. A supervisor and employee have difficulty compromising. Compromise also works well as an intermediate solution

*Authoritative Command* it is one of the most appealing and time-efficient strategies we have. "Do it because I told you to do it!" Authoritative Command however creates little investment in the solution. If people do not participate in designing a resolution, they have little commitment to maintaining it. The authoritative approach also creates win-lose

outcomes or even lose-lose. When this happens, a new enemy is created. You move from the role of a helper in the present conflict situation to a combatant in a new one. It leaves the parties without the needed skills to resolve subsequent disputes.

Authoritative command is appropriate under two conditions: When speed of response and resolution are critical and when authority is acceptable to the people involved.

*Organizational Structure Alteration*- Partitioning of an office space, transferring an employee to another part of the organization, firing an employee, changing job roles, changing reporting structure and creating a new organizational chart to solve a conflict are all ways of altering the organizational structure to eliminate interaction between disputing parties. Changing the structure of organization is a common strategy, but the organization may lose some talented people that are hard to replace or the problem may simply be shifted to another department.

*Involving a Third Party.* Telling employees to work out their troubles on their own, and get along may work occasionally, but most of the time the conflict is pushed underground to resurface later in more destructive ways.

A better approach is to allow employees to meet with a third party, or *mediator* (which, in some cases, may be a manager), to assist them in their own resolution of the conflict.

There are four levels of potential interveners: facilitator, negotiator, arbitrator or intervener. . Most often, an outside mediator has a greater chance of succeeding. An insider may be part of the problem, may be perceived as favoring one of the stakeholders, and the stakeholders may be hesitant to share confidential information with an insider.

*Facilitator.* As a facilitator, the third party seeks to clarify the nature of the problem and to elicit ideas and feelings from the disputants. The facilitator often paraphrases and questions

their positions, but always with the intent that disputants remain in charge of their own solution. The purpose is to elevate the quality of the analysis and potential solutions.

*Negotiator.* As a negotiator, the third party takes a stronger role than that of a facilitator. The negotiator mediates differences and forces clarification. This role is designed to equalize power between the disputants by actively providing options and delivering judgments to accomplish a just resolution. While this is an active role, the negotiator recognizes that the solution is still in the hands of the disputants.

*Arbitrator.* As an arbitrator, the third party has been selected by the disputants to make a decision. This role is stronger than the previous two. In deciding, an arbitrator can pursue either fixed arbitration (where the arbitrator picks one position) or flexible arbitration (in which the third party creates new alternatives). In either form, parties seek a ruling and a statement describing what they are to do.

*Intervener.* An intervener enters disputes independently. The conflicters have not invited the intervener and often do not welcome the intrusion. In this role, the intervener, who initiates all the action, examines the data and imposes solutions.

If the insider is a supervisor, the mediator role becomes more difficult, as supervisors tend to become overly directive, taking more of an arbiter's role and forcing a decision upon the parties.

The conflict management process is more apt to succeed if stakeholders have respect for the mediator's integrity, impartiality, and ability. Respect for the mediator is an important element in a successful negotiation. It compels stakeholders to be of their best behavior. Although not always the case, over-familiarity with an inside mediator may negate this "best behavior" effect.

An outside mediator should treat issues with confidentiality. Exceptions are such instances as where illegal activities or activities that are detrimental to the health of the organisation have taken place.

All parties should be informed of exceptions to the confidentiality rule ahead of time. Any sharing of information based on the exceptions needs to be done on a need-to-know basis to minimize giving out information that could hurt one or both of the parties. Employees may be less hesitant to speak out when assured of confidentiality.

All four of these roles have utility in conflict situations. However frequent use of the latter two roles (arbitrator or intervenor), the more toxic your organization and the more subsequent conflicts you are likely to breed. On the other hand, the more you rely on the first two roles (facilitator or negotiator), the more control internal members retain and the more investment they maintain in the outcome.

*Role Analysis Technique (RAT).* Role analysis technique is an excellent strategy for resolving boundary conflicts. It involves the clarification and adaptation of individual organizational roles (Huse, 1975). RAT operates on the premise that most of us are given a job description (often outmoded) on our first day of work. But jobs change and roles change with them. It is expected that somehow workers will "discover" their new roles and do them extraordinarily well. In some cases this results in boundary conflicts. Clarification and adaptation of individual organizational role in boundary conflicts are therefore very effective in solving such conflicts.

*Norm Setting.* A norm is an operational principle or expectation that implicitly or explicitly governs the actions of a group of people. Conflicts often arise for which you have not generated any norms or in organizations where no explicit norms exist at all. The strategy then calls for generating norms in the midst of the conflict. By its very nature, norm-setting can turn irrational situation into a more rational, focused conflict resolution session. The process of defining norms deflects

immediate discussion from the "what," or content of the content of the conflict, to the more objective "how," or the procedures to be followed. It shifts the focus from laying blame for past errors to establishing guidelines for future behavior. These guidelines debar workers from using individual rules that are often in opposition.

*Communication and Feedback.* Communication and feedback do help when a conflict originates in misunderstanding. A disputant often assumes that another person disagrees with him or her simply because he or she does not understand. Communication do not only ease existing conflicts, but tends to eliminate future conflicts

*Smoothing and Avoidance.* The meaning of avoidance strategy is obvious- "I simply close my eyes and hope the problem goes away". Avoidance is usually a negative and a non-productive strategy. The conflict does not go away, it goes underground and it gets larger and larger. However, avoidance and smoothing work on such occasions as when the issue is truly trivial, a product of the immediate moment; when the timing is wrong for any other strategy; when the issue can be resolved by someone else and when you are in the midst of other more critical conflict situations.

### Matching Strategies with Conflicts
One finds that there is a relationship between types of conflict and resolution strategies. For intangible conflicts, preferable strategies are Superordinate Goal and Interdependence Analysis. For tangible conflicts, Problem Solving, Expansion of Resources and Organizational Structure Alteration are preferable strategies to use. Interpersonal conflicts are best resolved by Norm-setting, Interdependent Analysis, and Human Relations Interventions. Boundary conflicts can be resolved by Role Analysis Technique, Norm-Setting, and Third Party Intervention. Finally, for perceptual conflict Norm-Setting and Communication Feedback are the best strategies to use.

### Dealing with Difficult People:
### The Types and Responses
There are people who do not respond to rational attempts at conflict resolution. According to Harvey and Droit, difficult people come in thirteen types. These are as follows;

*The Irrational type.* With the irrational type, the problem is not the content o f the issue, but the inability of the person to hear anyone else. This type is impervious to communication. This type is best handled by letting them talk. By expending energy, the irrational type eventually runs out of things to say. Listening well will help discover what the irrational type is after. Questions tend to calm irrational type down. Once the irrational becomes engaged with questions, you can turn the discussion in the direction you want.

*The recognition Seeker-* The recognition seeker is accustomed to getting attention for negative behavior. This type will do virtually anything to get someone to notice them. To counteract the Recognition Seeker, you must withdraw recognition for negative behavior while simultaneously targeting positive behavior with praise.

*The Bully-*The bully loves confrontation. He/she wins by intimidation and focuses on the battle at hand. The bully is trying to overpower you. Do not retreat! Once you do, the Bully will be back, ever stronger and more insistent. Keep calm.

*Space Cadet.* The Space Cadet is in a different world and whatever you say fails to touch him or her. Since a space Cadet can go on forever over nothing it is best to agree and go on. Use their words to restate your position so that they feel their concerns are being addressed. Do not waste a lot of time with the Space cadet.

*The Hidden Agenda Type.* All of us will have hidden agendas at times, but some people repeatedly hide their intents and needs. Very often, they embroil us in fights over the secret, not the real agenda. In dealing with Hidden Agenda Types, be careful not to lose your

agenda to theirs. And do not feel guilty about moving on with the initial agenda.

*The Oblivious Type.* The oblivious type is impervious to feedback. Although these people do not mean harm, they repeatedly violate the needs of others. They simply do not realize what they are doing. The oblivious Type needs to be confronted head on. If the oblivious type is not uncomfortable to the point of feeling disease, the difficult behavior will continue.

*The Whiner.* The whiner has had years to practice and perfect that whine. You will never correct it. The whiner calls for an out-of-body experience. Then try to accept the message underneath the whine.

*High Ground fighter.* The high ground fighter is a conflictor who fights from a morally or publicly superior position. These contenders have sympathy and public relations on their side. You need to think strategically and as fast as you can about the issue

*The Wonderfully Nice Person.* When you think of difficult people we think of nasty types. The wonderfully nice person can also be difficult. These people overpower you with their niceness-and your guilt. You say "yes" and hate yourself later. Refuse to give in to it. Stick to what you think is important, know what you want, and do not deviate from it.

*The Sniper.* Snipers will not confront to your face, but only behind your back. They also seem comfortable lying to you. The only option to deal with the sniper is to bring him or her out in the open. Agreed-upon norms make up the accountability factor you want in place with Snipers. Be direct and confront.

*The Know It All.* The know it all knows everything about everything. These difficult people have read, seen, tried and experienced it all. They are superior, if we can judge from their tone and attitude. The know-it-all has a better way, can do it better, and can offer more suggestions than anyone else, especially after the fact. It is important to test the knowledge base of this type. The know it all may actually

be an expert. By focusing on the message, you may find some real expertise. Test that knowledge by giving the Know-It-All small expert tasks to complete. In this way, you are harnessing energy that would otherwise be used for "you should have asked me."

*The Passive Resister.* The passive resister does not like to be direct, but likes to control through guilt and last-minute comments. Passive resisters share indirection with the sniper. They control best in group settings. The passive resister is a supreme difficult person. This type builds a reputation on his or her consistently negative participation and refusal to participate. As a result, the Passive Resister becomes the center of attention whenever he or she is asked to be involved. The Passive Resister needs to be brought into the discussion, given the opportunity to respond, and asked to declare or refuse to support a group consensus. By bringing the Passive Resister out into the public awareness, you let everyone experience the responses. If the Passive Resister continues to be so, then you must avoid guilt. They have had the opportunity to participate and refused. Let the Passive Resister know that the group is moving ahead, with or without their input.

*The Indecisive.* Indecisives never seem to reach a decision .More data, more time, and more options. Put under pressure the Indecisives want someone to choose for them. They hate accountability, they simply cannot choose among a variety of alternatives.

To work with indecisive, you should offer only binary choices. An effective manager provides a decisive with just two choices at a time, and then compels him to make a choice. Most of the difficult types will try to shift the problem to you. Insist the problem is theirs and they must solve it. Moreover, do not allow yourself to feel guilty or uneasy about their indecision-that will only lead you to make the decision for them. Provide binary choices and stick to them.

## Conclusion

Conflict resolution comes about when conflict is managed and managed correctly. At the base of all conflict resolution is analysis. Analyzing what you are dealing with gives you control and provides you with energy to deal with the conflict and move forward in implementing the plans and realizing the goals of the organization.

Conflicts will crop up. Conflicts should occur. Managers who understand how to use conflict can use it to advance organizational goals and enrich people interaction. Conflict management then become a key building block of strong and effective organizations.

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