



# Conflict Matters

KEY INFORMATION SHEET

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Conflicts arise or are present everywhere and can occur at many levels of society, between individuals, between staff members of an organization, between groups, in communities, at national and international level. Conflicts arise from differences. They occur whenever people disagree over their values, motivations, perceptions, ideas, needs, or desires. If conflicts are not dealt with in a proper way, they might harm human relations or erupt. But there are ways to deal with conflicts...

## Why does conflict matter?

**Conflicts are a normal part life and are not always negative.** They might provide opportunities for growth through improved understanding and insight. Or think about competition, where two or more parties work against each other to attain some goal, which often is useful for social or economic development. Examples are sports competitions, political competition with the aim of democracy, or vendors trying to sell the same product.

Dealing with conflicts is important in order to:

- keep working in an effective and pleasant way
- avoid stress and avoid people becoming ill
- avoid building up anger which could result in eruption that can permanently damage relations
- safeguard rights and well-being of people
- protect people
- search for long-term effects in order to prevent future problems

Conflicts occur in all organizations and provide an opportunity for an organization's development. Growth will happen when conflicts are managed effectively by

**“In the middle of difficulty lies opportunity”**  
~ Albert Einstein ~

problem solving. A conflict could provide an opportunity to improve, could lead to a better understanding of others, challenge innovation, generate creative ideas and increase motivation.

## What is conflict?

Conflict is a relationship between two or more individuals or groups who have - or who think they have - incompatible goals; it is an ongoing state of hostility between the two parties, which makes agreement or coexistence difficult or impossible. The parties involved perceive a threat to their needs, interests or concerns.



## Some main causes of organizational conflict are:

- 1 Lack of resources
- 2 Difference of opinion / individual difference
- 3 Confrontation when personal values and opinions are opposed by other values and opinions
- 4 Lack of respect for others' ideas
- 5 Personal egos, ambitions and goals of organizational members

- 6 Pressure on members of the organization by their relatives or families
- 7 Gender discrimination
- 8 Poor communication systems within the organization
- 9 Failure of the organization to meet its intended goals

**In dealing with conflicts the terms resolution and transformation are used.**

**Conflict resolution** is a range of processes aimed at alleviating or eliminating sources of conflict. The goal is to find answers to problems to end something that is causing pain or difficulty. A conflict resolution standpoint is clear about what needs to be stopped - violence, for example.

**Conflict transformation** focuses on change and addresses two questions: 'What do we need to stop?' and 'What do we hope to build?' Transformation sees the presenting problem as a potential opportunity to transform the relationship and the systems in which relationships are embedded.

**In responding to conflict two questions are important.** The first one is whether the response helps the party to get what it wants and the second whether the relationship between the parties will be preserved.

**Type of responses**

• *Avoiding or repression*

Avoidance is a common response to the negative perception of conflict. 'Perhaps if we don't do anything, it will blow over'. But feelings get pent up, views go unexpressed and the conflict festers until it becomes too big to ignore. People do not satisfy their own concerns or the concerns of the other party. This is a 'lose-lose' situation.

• *Accommodating*

There is a willingness to co-operate in satisfying others' concerns, while at the same time acting unassertively in meeting their own. People tend to be diplomatic; preserving the relationship is seen as most important. This is a 'lose-win' situation.

**“ If we don't change the direction we are going, we are likely to end up where we are heading ”**

~ Chinese Proverb ~

• *Dominating*

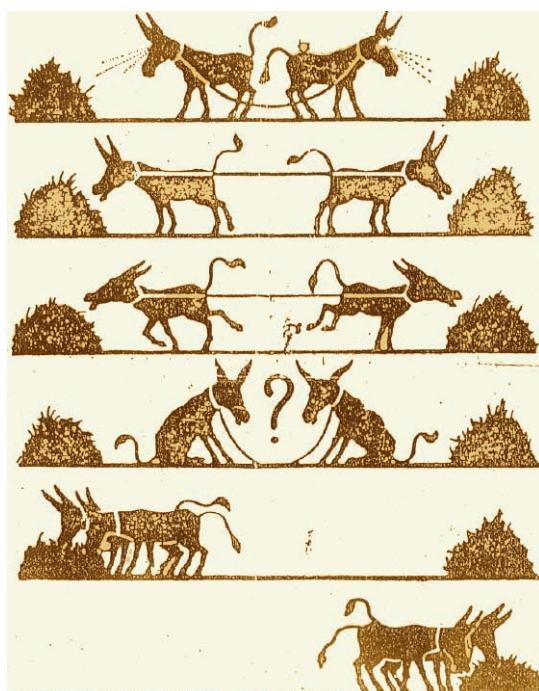
A style found very often to control the process is the domineering way. A party using this style does everything to get what it wants. It doesn't care about the relationship with the other party. The aim is to win and let the other party lose.

• *Compromising*

Parties do not want to dominate the process but also do not want to surrender. They hope that by compromising a happy medium can be found. In this way they expect to get something of what they want while simultaneously preserve something of their relationship with the other party. This is a partly win and partly lose situation.

• *Solving the problem through collaborating*

This is the best way as parties take both their interests and future relationships seriously. They work together towards a solution that will satisfy the real needs and interests of each party. In this way their relationship can be maintained and even strengthened. This is a 'win-win' situation.



## Methods for joint problem solving

There are various methods to be used depending on the seriousness of the problem.



### Informal discussion

Parties are encouraged to see conflict as a problem to be solved rather than a battle to be won. 'How can we solve the problem?'

### Facilitating

A decision-maker brings parties together to help determine the solution. The emphasis is on co-operation.

### Negotiation

Parties sit down together, educate each other about the issues, and develop and assess reasonable solutions. Negotiation is an important tool in order to reach solutions that are beneficial for both parties.

### Mediation

A neutral third party helps two or more conflicting people or groups to find a solution to their problem. Mediators can be asked to facilitate agreements in a wide variety of disputes, from wars and international politics, to business disagreements and arguments within families and local communities. At whatever level, the main characteristic of a mediator is independence and neutrality. The mediator does not belong to either of the conflicting parties, and will always view the dispute "from outside".

## Questions to be asked in choosing methods

- Does it help a party to get what it needs or wants?
- Does it help a party to get along with the other party?
- What is the best approach for the specific situation?
- What will be the expected or wanted effect or outcome?
- What are the issues at stake?

## Keep in mind

As conflicts are usually characterized by high emotions it is important to create a "safe and comfortable environment" for participants to open up and express themselves. Furthermore:

- Shift the focus from positions onto interests; encourage flexibility expressing something in a different way
- Deal with stress and anger: know how to deal with anger and threats from the other person as well as your own anger in the most effective and appropriate way

Good communication skills are essential:

- Use the five C's of communication: be clear, correct, concise, convincing and complete
- Listen actively with understanding
- Listen and restate in your own words what another person has said
- Be open to hearing the perceptions and needs of others, even if you disagree with what they are saying

**MOST CONFLICTS ARE BASED ON PERCEPTIONS RATHER THAN REALITY!**

## Further reading & information:

### • Approaches to negotiation

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Negotiation#Approaches\\_to\\_negotiation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Negotiation#Approaches_to_negotiation)

### • Article on organizational conflict

<http://work911.com/conflict/carticles/orgcon.htm>

### • Articles on conflict resolution and transformation, including tools

[www.berghof-handbook.net/articles/](http://www.berghof-handbook.net/articles/)

- *Conflict resolution in Manual on training activities for youth, with games (see p. 100)*  
[www2.gtz.de/dokumente/bib/gtz2009-0098en-youth-social-work.pdf](http://www2.gtz.de/dokumente/bib/gtz2009-0098en-youth-social-work.pdf)

### • Conflict resolution skills

[www.helpguide.org/mental/eq8\\_conflict\\_resolution.htm](http://www.helpguide.org/mental/eq8_conflict_resolution.htm)

### • Toolkit for approaches to conflict solving

[http://kroc.nd.edu/sites/default/files/reflective\\_peacebuilding.pdf](http://kroc.nd.edu/sites/default/files/reflective_peacebuilding.pdf)