



Unit 12

Understanding Conflicts and its Types

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ✓ Understand what conflict is and how it can escalate.
- ✓ Understand the types of conflict and the stages of conflict.

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Defining Conflict

What is Conflict?

How would you define conflict?

From an organizational point of view, we'll suggest that a **disagreement** is a change to a relationship that disrupts the normal routine. Conflict is more serious, and is a consequence of the disagreement. **Conflict** includes a threat to someone's needs, concerns, or interests. Conflict is a normal part of the workplace and while it can be negative, alarming, and difficult to get through, it can also lead to tremendous opportunities for growth and a facilitator to change because of resulting improved understanding and insight.

In defining conflict, it is important to realize that conflict can result from you striving for the outcomes you prefer, and your actions that prevent others from getting the outcome they want.

Conflict is pretty normal in the workplace, where people with different values, goals, and perspectives manage complex and stress-provoking projects. As a result, conflict can be predicted. If we develop procedures for identifying, defining, and managing conflict, then we can constructively manage conflict and take advantage of its opportunities.

Problem solving strategies are essential for successful conflict management. Applying a problem solving approach to conflict management helps to transition a potentially negative situation to one that allows us to entertain new possibilities.

Assumptions

Conflict is avoidable.

Conflict is not avoidable. Conflict is the result of disagreements which often relate to differences in values, goals, and perspectives. Not everyone is going to like, agree with, nor be able to work with just anyone else.

Conflict produces inappropriate reactions by the people involved.

Sometimes reactions are inappropriate. Sometimes they are very appropriate. Can you give some examples of each? Think of sports. Referees intervene when there is a conflict among players. That is appropriate. Then fans boo the referees, or physically assault them. That is inappropriate.

Conflict creates polarization within the organization.

Conflict can cause polarization. Think of health care as an example. Communities can become polarized over things like whether they need a new hospital or whether the present hospital is adequate for the job.

We should avoid conflict.

Since conflict is perfectly normal, we should expect it to occur, just like death and taxes. We must accept its existence. Trying to stop all conflict is a waste of our time and energy, especially since there can be such positive results to some conflict.

Conflict can have either constructive or destructive effects, and we must have a good sense as to when it is something we want to eliminate and when it is something we want to build on.

Positives and Negatives

Identify the positive and negative aspects of conflict.

Positive Aspects	Negative Aspects

Types of Conflict

We can experience three different types of conflict:

- Inner conflict
- Interpersonal conflict
- Group conflict

Inner Conflict

Inner conflict can be difficult to recognize, yet in many ways this conflict is the most difficult to live with.

Examples:

- Perhaps you have set an at-work goal that will cut down the time you spend with your family. You may feel conflicted about such a goal.
- You know you should go to a meeting where an important social issue will be discussed and a strategy developed. However, you are tired and would really prefer to stay home. Your conscience says “go” and your body says “stay.”
- You disagree with your boss about a decision that has just been made. Part of you thinks you should be strong and voice your opposition. Another part of you says to just sit tight.
- You have just been offered the opportunity to apply for a promotion. Part of you wants to go for it. You are long-overdue a raise and you know you can do the job. However, another part of you recognizes that you could try and fail. That might be worse than never trying at all. Besides, you are comfortable right now. You know your job. You could do it blindfolded. Do you really need the headache of a new job?

Inner conflicts are often about questions of integrity, values, and ethics—about doing the right thing versus what you want to do.

Interpersonal Conflict

This is conflict between two or more people, and it may be caused by a number of different factors. What are some of the factors you have seen? Responses from the group can include: personality clashes, culture clashes, values clashes, breakdown in communication, and sometimes workplace policies and practices that create conflict.

Group Conflict

Group conflict may very well be relatively independent of the individuals occupying the roles within the structure. For example, conflict between marketing and production is fairly common. The marketing department, being customer oriented, may believe some exceptions can and should be made in production for the sake of future sales. The production department may view such exceptions as unreasonable and not in the best interests of the organization.

The conflict situation can be even more intense if the managers of each department are also experiencing interpersonal conflict.

Open Conflict vs. Hidden Conflict

There are two ways of dealing with conflict. We can be open and up front about it or we can keep it hidden and let it smolder inside us.

Overt (open) conflict may arise due to such factors as:

- Misunderstandings or differing assumptions and perceptions. This presents an opportunity for clarification and a better understanding of oneself and others.
- Different management styles, behavior patterns, and interpersonal relations can prevent collaboration or the move toward common goals. Here is an opportunity for improving interpersonal relationships, clarifying differences in approach, and creating mutual trust and concern.
- A conflict of goals that is significant and real.

A realistic approach is to open up a dialogue over the differences and see where the divergence is really serious. This way, they may be able to work out an acceptable compromise. For example, let's say that a married couple is planning a vacation. The husband would like to spend the time at a fishing lodge or putting around fixing up the house. The wife would like to spend the time at the seashore and perhaps visiting relatives. If both people know that their goals are different and that they see vacation time differently, they can talk it through. Perhaps they compromise and work out a schedule both parties can live with. Perhaps they decide to have one type of vacation this year and a different type next year. Ultimately there is an opportunity to resolve the conflict.

Hidden, suppressed, or covert conflict is more difficult to deal with because it may even be hidden from the person who is conflicted (as in inner conflict), and there is never an opportunity to talk it through or to come to terms with it.

When Volvo, the Swedish car manufacturer, went from whole product work teams, where employees worked on a car from start to finish, to the more efficient assembly line model, workers were incensed. However, rather than making their position known to senior managers, they chose to be covert about their resentment and sabotaged a number of the automobiles coming off the assembly line.

Spontaneous and Reflective Behavior

The difference between reflective and spontaneous behavior can be seen by comparing the way people think with the way they write. Typically the difference is not only in vocabulary, but also in the way in which they express themselves.

Writing takes time, which the brain can use to reflect on what is being written. When people speak, they have far less time to reflect on what they are saying. Generally, **writing** is reflective while **speaking** is spontaneous.

Those who are **extroverts** are notorious for opening their mouth and putting their foot in it. This is spontaneous behavior: neither thinking things through nor considering the consequences before we speak.

However, **introverts** are usually more reflective. They demonstrate more reflective action. This means they think before they speak. Alas, too often they also self-censure to the point that what needs to be said doesn't get verbalized.

As an example, look at what happens when managers change jobs or move up the ladder. At least initially new managers are more apt to choose reflective behavior and to think through the consequences of their words or their actions. When under stress, they are more apt to revert to spontaneous action and then regret their choice of words.

Managers may lack awareness of their own spontaneous behavior patterns, as well as the negative effects of their behavior on others' spontaneous behavior. For starters, it is helpful for people to be aware that we are programmed with a set of personal characteristics and values which may lead to spontaneous behavior that is not always helpful to others.

We can also strive to uncover the effect of our behavior on others through careful questioning. We can use feedback from employees and others to actively uncover the blind spots and hidden behaviors we may be exhibiting.

The Johari Window

Understanding the Johari Window

	Known to Others	Not Known to Others
Known to Oneself	Open 1	Partially Open 2
Not Known to Oneself	Partially Open 3	Hidden 4

There are two major ways of becoming more aware of the effect our behavior has on ourselves and others. The first involves listening to yourself in order to understand how you are reacting or feeling, and what is causing your reactions or feelings. We have a tendency to ignore our reactions to the world around us, but we can make our feelings and reactions more conscious if we work on this.

The second way of becoming more aware is to request feedback from other people as to how they see you and how they are reacting to your behavior.

Joe Luft and Harry Ingham developed the Johari Windows concept. This concept is a way of looking at our self-awareness and our ability to ask feedback of others.

The window illustrates their point that there are certain things you know about yourself and certain things that you don't know. Similarly, there are certain things others know about you (that you may or may not know) and there are certain things they don't know. They make the assumption that it takes energy to hide information from yourself and others, and that the more information is known, the better and clearer communication will be.

Building a relationship often involves working to expand your open/free or "known to self and others" window, while decreasing your blind and hidden areas.

As you become more willing to self-disclose, you reduce your hidden area, and give other people more information to react to, thus reducing your blind area. As you encourage others to self-disclose to you, your blind area is further reduced. As you reduce your blind area, you increase self-awareness. This helps you to be even more self-disclosing with others.

My Window

In the space below, draw your Johari Window as you believe it is under normal circumstances at work.

Case Study: Spontaneous and Reflective Behaviors

Case Study

Miranda signed out a company vehicle, as usual, on Monday morning. She was going to the grocery store to pick up creamers and coffee for the staff room, and then making a stop at a local deli for a tray of sandwiches, cookies, and bottles of water for a day-long meeting. She liked this part of her job because it meant she got out of the office while everyone else was adjusting to being back at work for the week. Miranda had a very good relationship with the deli, which always made sure that her trays were created to her exacting specifications. She was equally particular about the other aspects of her job, and well respected for her results as an Executive Assistant.

Andrew Smart was Miranda's manager. He was having a rough day on this particular Monday. He'd had words with his wife before leaving for work that morning, he had a stack of e-mails and paperwork to look after, and he was chairing the meeting that day with some Very Important People. This meeting had put a lot of pressure on him, and he was coping about as well as he usually did; he'd get mad at someone in the office and let them deal with it. He noticed that the normally reliable and very efficient Miranda was late. Sometimes her ability to manage competing priorities and always meet her deadlines irritated him. He looked at his watch several times as the meeting got underway, and wondered where Miranda was with the coffee and creamers. He didn't like starting a meeting without coffee, and was also mildly irritated that there was none in the office on the weekend when he had been in doing some preparation work.

Miranda arrived back at the office shortly after 9:15 a.m., much later than she anticipated. She quickly put the sandwich platter in the refrigerator, and then started making coffee outside of the meeting room, trying to be quiet so that she would not distract anyone inside the room. She went to her desk about to pick up her phone when Andrew came noisily out of the room.

"There you are!" he exclaimed angrily, "You're late!"

"I know," Miranda started to reply. "The co..."

He cut her off angrily. "I can't take any excuses. This should have been ready an hour ago. You're going to have to start getting the coffee stuff on the weekend."

"But Andrew, I..."

"Forget it. Do you think I want to hear anything except that it's ready?"

“No, b-but I can knock on the door as soon as it is.”

“Good! You’re normally so reliable,” he was hissing so that no one in the meeting room could hear him, “and you’ve practically sabotaged me before I got started.”

Andrew stomped off toward the meeting room. Miranda reached up with her left hand and felt the bump on the side of her head, where she had struck the side window when another car had broadsided the company car. Her hands were shaking as she reached for the phone again to call the safety officer and find out what she needed to do next. She put the phone down instead of completing the call, and went to check the coffee. She needed to get Andrew settled down first rather than deal with another angry outburst from him.

When she finally called the safety officer about 20 minutes later, the first thing he asked her was if she was okay. “I’m fine,” Miranda insisted, “I just have a bump on my head where I hit the window.” Within a short couple of minutes, the safety officer, Stan, was at her side with an icepack. He had a look at her bump and commented that it was quite a goose egg. He looked at her shaking hands and got her some juice, and sat her down.

“Miranda, you could have a concussion, so we need to get you to the doctor. I’ll take you.”

Stan found someone to make sure that they could get the lunch ready for Andrew’s meeting, and called the company doctor to see him straightaway. After her consultation and confirming that Miranda had a nasty bump on her head and a concussion, Stan helped her fill out an accident report, and looked at the copy of the police report that the officer had given Miranda at the scene. When he asked her why she hadn’t called him sooner, as per the company policy, he said so gently and without frustration. Miranda told him about Andrew’s anger over being late, and that she had to get the coffee on.

“You could have asked Alison for help,” he suggested.

“Alison was in the meeting for the beginning, giving them a report. There was no one else around.”

“Well, looks like the real issue here is Andrew, after the person who hit you in the car.”

“Andrew is often gruff,” Miranda said, “But I do a really good job, and he normally recognizes that and leaves me alone to do my work.”

Andrew was not sympathetic about Miranda’s collision, and remained focused on the inconvenience that her being late caused. He reiterated that he was going to have to make sure that Miranda picked up creamers and coffee on their own time during the weekend, so that there were no delays to a morning

meeting. The fact that the car she was in had to be written off because of damage was not his issue, and he was not going to get involved in it.

Mark Corman, Andrew's boss, heard about Miranda's collision when he received a copy of the incident report from Stan. He immediately called Andrew to ask him why he had not advised him of the problem personally. Mark was annoyed that Andrew did not seem concerned about Miranda's condition, nor the loss of a company car.

While Andrew was on the phone with Mark, he stared toward Miranda's cubicle. "That woman is causing me far too much trouble, and it's time for her to move on," he thought to himself.

Questions

What behavior was Andrew exhibiting?

What behavior was Stan exhibiting?

Do people always respond the way we think they will in any given situation? Can you provide some reasons for your response?

Think of some examples of times when you have been surprised by someone's response to a workplace situation.

Further Reading:

- ✓ *Benjamin, Susan F. Perfect Phrases for Dealing with Difficult Situations at Work. McGraw-Hill, 2008.*
- ✓ *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion (Collins Business Essentials) Revised Edition, Kindle Edition by Robert B. Cialdini PhD*