



Unit 13

Different Stages of Conflict

Learning Outcomes

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

- ✓ Recognize the five most common conflict resolution styles and when to use them.
- ✓ Increase positive information flow through non-verbal and verbal communication skills.

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Different Stages of Conflict

The Five Stages of Conflict

It can be helpful to understand how dynamic conflict is. It doesn't often appear suddenly; instead the conflict passes through a series of progressive stages as tension builds. These stages of development can be expressed in several ways, and we find the following method straightforward to remember.

Latent Conflict

At this stage, the foundation for conflict exists but has not been openly expressed or acknowledged by either side. For example, perceptions of how an employee talks to their boss may interfere with basic communication between the two individuals. In the case study, there was a potential conflict between Stan and Andrew. Stan didn't agree with Andrew's initial reaction to the collision, and there was also the potential for conflict between Andrew and Mark, if Andrew decided to fire Miranda, an excellent worker, from her job.

Perceived Conflict

Here, one or both parties are able to see the cause of the conflict. For example, Robin and Taylor are good friends, doing lots of things together in their free time, from sharing meals to playing video games. When Robin starts dating, Taylor suddenly finds himself spending a lot of time alone, and feels offended at the change of routine and partial loss of access to a longstanding friend.

Felt Conflict

This stage is where tension is beginning to build, and people become short-tempered with one another. Colleagues or friends begin making negative or short tempered comments at one another.

Manifest Conflict

At this stage, the struggle is underway and even becomes obvious to people not directly involved. Arguments or hurt feelings are no longer suppressed or filtered, and arguments or disagreements can happen in public. These can include the boss/employee shouting match, spousal arguments, the rebellious teenager and parent, and political debates where candidates hold nothing back.

Conflict Aftermath

In this stage, the conflict has either been resolved or suppressed. The aftermath establishes new conditions that either lead to more effective cooperation or to a new conflict that may be more severe

than the first. A friendship might end, someone gets fired, a divorce, or one political candidate wins an election.

In some cases the resolution can be positive while also ending the issue. Friends arrive at a compromise both can live with, a marriage emerges stronger than ever, or a teenager grows up and the parent-child relationship grows strong again.

Conclusion

Conflict does not always pass through all of these stages. As well, parties to a conflict may not be at the same stage simultaneously. One may be at the perceived stage while the other is at the manifest stage, for example.

Another Version of the Conflict Process

This approach to the struggle spectrum demonstrates the transition from calm joint decision-making to open fighting and the equivalent of war.

Stage 1: Mild Difference

Problems between people can start out as very minor differences or having very few things in common. At this stage, both parties deal with the problem by willingly joining together and discussing matters openly because they share some level of faith and good will. However, if a satisfactory outcome cannot be agreed upon and there is no resolution, the struggle may advance to the next level.

Stage 2: Disagreement

When mild differences are not resolved, we choose how we want to handle them. We may lay the issues aside and try to forget about it, we may hold onto the issue for future reference, or sometimes we let issues fester until there is nothing to do but disagree. When the issue escalates to this level, the people involved begin to show signs of being polarized: mild differences become more explicit, and our position becomes more important than the issue itself may have been.

The initial steps at this level can incorporate joint deliberation and problem solving, but if a resolution is not found, the parties begin negotiating with each other. Their goal at this stage is to find something that will provide satisfaction for both parties. However, communication is less open, and may result in a stalemate if communication breaks down or an easy solution cannot be found.

Stage 3: Dispute

By this stage, communication is getting heated as each person sees the other side in an increasingly negative light and polarization contributes to the problem not getting resolved. Parties may find themselves shouting at one another, and accusing each other of spiteful attempts, and nasty behavior. Other issues – including past hurts – may be raised as emotions become more and more aroused.

Disputes include intense arguments and bargaining. Bargaining involves persuasion, threats, proposals, and counter-proposals, all in the context of mutually exclusive goals. Each party may be willing to give up on certain points but only if the other party is prepared to give up something in return. Communication is tense and limited.

Stage 4: Campaign

When the parties fail to find resolution, they move to campaign or litigation. At this point, the combatants begin to expand the struggle by recruiting supporters to help with their cause through word of mouth and the use of media. Political struggles move quickly to this stage as candidates campaign for votes.

Persuasion becomes a critical tool during any campaign. By this time, goals are highly exclusive, and campaign positions are weakened if either party shows that they are willing to compromise or there is some development of mutual understanding. The win-lose context is the focus, and communication efforts can become frustrated as each party speaks to their own audience, rather than to each other.

Stage 5: Litigation

Litigation involves setting up legal action to resolve a dispute. There are two levels of litigation: the arbitration process and court. Arbitration is a milder form of litigation and is less formal, since it is presided over by an arbitrator rather than a judge. Witnesses come forward and the proceedings are antagonistic, with a win-lose orientation for both parties. Decision-making is left up to the arbitrator, who is at liberty to select aspects from each side of the argument, and whose decision is final.

When labor disputes reach a certain point, an arbitrator is sometimes appointed to settle the issues and in order to prevent work disruptions or labor strikes.

Stage 6: Fight and/or War

This stage is characterized by violence and destructive behavior. Declared wars, undeclared wars that include military action, spousal homicide, and workplace violence are all demonstrated at this stage as one party tries to gain measured advantage over the other.

There is still communication at this stage, although the use of conversation has been eliminated. Physical action including the firing of weapons, hitting someone, or throwing a piece of furniture all have a message to them as one party tries to outmuscle and/or completely annihilate the other.

Conflict Outcomes

Lose-Lose

A lose-lose outcome means that no one gets what they really want, and there is a strong likelihood that the level of conflict and underlying feelings about what is happening are unlikely to change. A lose-lose result can come from one or both parties avoiding, compromising, or trying to smooth things over.

Avoidance can be practiced by one or both parties, where they pretend the conflict doesn't exist, or hope that it will simply fade away. **Compromising** means that both parties agree to give something up in order to reach agreement. **Smoothing** highlights similarities and areas of agreement while playing down the differences. Smoothing may ignore the actual conflict in an effort to achieve common interests or even just a peaceful coexistence.

Compromising can lead to a lose-lose outcome because it occurs when each side of the conflict gives something up that they saw as valuable. One outcome of this seemingly conciliatory approach can be that each party incubates issues, and while on the surface they may appear to be settled, they can just as easily reappear later.

Win-Lose

In Win-Lose conflicts, one party gets what they want, and the other party does not. This could be the result of a competition where there is just one winner due to superior skill, domination, or force, or because of a command from someone with authority.

This result never addresses the root cause of the conflict, and indeed most likely suppresses the desires of the losing party. Future conflict over the same issue is likely, as is resentment.

Win-Win

A Win-Win outcome is achieved by addressing the issues and often, with the use of problem-solving, to define and resolve differences. This positive approach to conflict involves recognition by all parties involved that something is wrong, and when problem-solving is applied and both parties commit to it, the conflict does actually get resolved. Win-win conditions eliminate reasons for continuing or resurrecting the conflict, since all relevant issues are worked out.

A win-win happens when both parties understand the value in one another's goals, and in reaching a resolution together. Problem-solving is the most successful approach to conflict resolution, and confrontation can also be very effective when it is done respectfully. Effective managers will be constructive users of confrontation and problem solving as opposed to avoidance or compromise.

Strategies for Dealing with Conflict

In all instances where people are involved, it helps to accept the fact that there is always potential for conflict. If two people want the same parking spot, everyone wants to work the same hours in a 24-hour operation, or one employee thinks that another is being favored, you have a conflict brewing. Depending on how the people involved choose to react, the results of conflict can be positive or negative.

We'll explore this topic in terms of three basic conflict management strategies:

- The win/lose strategy: One individual wins over the other.
- The lose/lose strategy: Both individuals lose something or everything.
- The win/win strategy: Conflict is resolved to all parties' satisfaction, usually through a step-by-step, problem-solving process.

Win/Lose Strategy

If you are aiming at the win/lose strategy and coming out on the winning team, you may get what you want but it will be at the expense of someone else. While on the surface it will appear that the conflict is over with, the truth is that the leftover feelings of resentment or frustration in the other party will fester for a long time, and you potentially will end up in another conflict.

In the workplace, we see this strategy applied either by managers (what I say goes) or by the majority (we vote and get what we want). In the former situation, the manager is an autocrat who makes decisions and implements a decision without feedback. Sometimes this includes statements like, "do as I say or go find a job somewhere else." That statement generally ends any thought of debate or bargaining from the staff.

If we use a majority approach then people can vote on a decision, although anyone who votes against will not get what they want and could harbor resentment.

The win/lose strategy is a necessary part of today's workplace. When two sides refuse to work out a solution together by problem solving, and particularly if productivity or safety are at risk, it is the manager's job to make a decision. These won't be popular decisions, and as we mentioned, conflict may rise in the future over the same issue because it was not really resolved so much as it was quashed.

Lose/Lose Strategy

Since this strategy means that both parties obviously cannot have what they want it may seem completely negative, but this is not the case. The lose/lose strategy can be used to eliminate conflict in three valuable ways.

Compromise

If one party or the other feels that they are giving up too much in a compromise, this doesn't work to resolve the conflict. If, however, they can stand to both give up something and live with the results, then a compromise is a form of lose/lose that can be effective.

Arbitration

An arbitrator is a neutral third party who is hired to determine how a resolution should be terms. While neither party may be completely happy, both parties do have to agree to arbitration before it gets underway, so they know in advance that they will have to give things up which might be significant.

Apply the Rules

Most workplaces have plenty of rules, policies, and procedures. These rules can be applied to resolve some conflicts, although they don't allow any flexibility for the particulars of unique needs. If a worker wants special consideration (more flexible shifts for no particular reason, a mid-year raise, extra holidays, a new parking stall, or to change teams [also for no particular reason]), applying the rules can stop the conflict immediately.

Sometimes the lose/lose strategy needs to be invoked when there is not enough time to work through an issue with problem solving, or when neither side can reach an agreement. Keep in mind that this strategy does not really deal with the root problem, and so the problem may surface again. Hopefully, if and when it does it'll be possible to approach the situation collaboratively.

Results of Win/Lose and Lose/Lose Strategies

We encounter the results of win/lose and lose/lose strategies all the time. The outcomes often lead to an "us versus them" or "my way or no way" situation rather than something that would be an "us versus the problem." The parties in the conflict focus on whose solution is superior instead of problem solving together and coming up with something that is suitable to everyone. In win/lose, the outcome is like a sporting match where there is only one winner and the other team can experience a devastating loss. After things are settled, people involved in the conflict still tend to see the issue from their point of view and remain unable to examine the problem from a perspective of mutual interest.

Win/Win Strategy

The basic purpose of the win/win strategy is to resolve the underlying issues and fix a problem rather than assign blame, penalty, or stimulate frustration. When using this strategy, all points of view are considered, the issues are examined, and a conversation ensues in order to design the best outcome that is available. The leader, or sometimes a mediator, in a win/win process needs to be flexible, patient, and to have a solid understanding of problem solving processes.

When a win/win strategy is applied, the problem that led to the conflict is actually resolved. Unlike a lose/lose or win/lose where underlying issues are likely to flare up in the future, a win/win is accepted by

both parties. The win/win demonstrates strong communication, emotional intelligence, and a willingness to achieve resolution and then move ahead. Mutual respect and trust are also outcomes.

Creating the Win/Win

Case Study

Max is a computer programmer who has worked with ABC Squared for four years. He started the job almost immediately after he graduated from a four-year university program. He was placed on a team of junior programmers who looked after essential tasks. After two years, he was promoted to a cross-functional project team where he is a senior programmer who is able to do a lot of creative, engaging work.

Max is a great resource to new programmers that have joined the company, even though they are not on his current team. He does a great job answering questions for people from outside his department who need some programming advice or support. In the last two years, Max has worked as part of a project team that has completed some high profile, enviable projects that have helped the company secure new business and increase their brand tremendously.

When a position for supervisor opened up for the team of junior programmers, Max did not apply for it despite the recommendations of his manager, Pat. Max likes what he does and knows that he is good at it, but does not feel that he has enough experience to succeed as a supervisor just yet. He shares this feeling with Pat and says that he would like to do some kind of supervisory training in order to prepare himself for future opportunities.

After the new supervisor, Robin, is hired, Max notices that Pat is not as friendly as he once was. Pat does not say hello in the morning or stop by Max's cubicle to chat. When Max works through an entire weekend to get a rush project done that Pat really needs completed, Pat doesn't even say thank you. Max is perplexed.

Not long after the rush project is completed, Max comes into the coffee room while Pat is there, and Pat tries to leave without speaking to Max. Max steps aside to let Pat pass, and despite wanting desperately to speak with Pat, he says nothing.

Pat spends most of Monday with the new supervisor, and at one point Max looks up from his work station to see Max and Robin looking his way and laughing. Max's feelings are hurt, but he doesn't want to approach Pat while Robin is around, if at all.

Instructions

Develop a win/win outcome for this conflict.

Conflict Resolution Style Questionnaire

The Questionnaire

Complete the following questionnaire, which comes from the work in organizational behavior by John Schermerhorn, James Hunt, and Richard Osborn. For each statement, think about how likely you are to respond in that way to such a situation. (To help you choose an answer, think about situations when what you wanted was different from what the other person wanted.) Check the rating that best corresponds to your response. (Leave the Points column blank for now.)

		Very Unlikely	Unlikely	Likely	Very Likely	Points
1.	I am usually persistent in pursuing my goals.					
2.	I try to win people over to my position.					
3.	I give up some points in exchange for others.					
4.	I feel that differences are not always worth worrying about.					

		Very Unlikely	Unlikely	Likely	Very Likely	Points
5.	I try to find a position that is intermediate between theirs and mine.					
6.	In negotiations, I try to be considerate of the other person's wishes.					
7.	I try to demonstrate logic and benefit to my position.					
8.	I always encourage a direct discussion of the problem.					
9.	I try to find a fair combination of gains and losses for both of us.					
10.	I attempt to immediately work through our differences.					
11.	I try to avoid creating unpleasantness for myself.					
12.	I might try to soothe the other's feelings and preserve our relationship.					
13.	I attempt to get all concerns and issues immediately out in the open.					
14.	I avoid taking positions that would create controversy.					
15.	I try not to hurt others' feelings.					

Scoring

Assign points to each response as follows in the Points column of the questionnaire:

- Very Unlikely: 1
- Unlikely: 2
- Likely: 3
- Very Likely: 4

Score Sheet

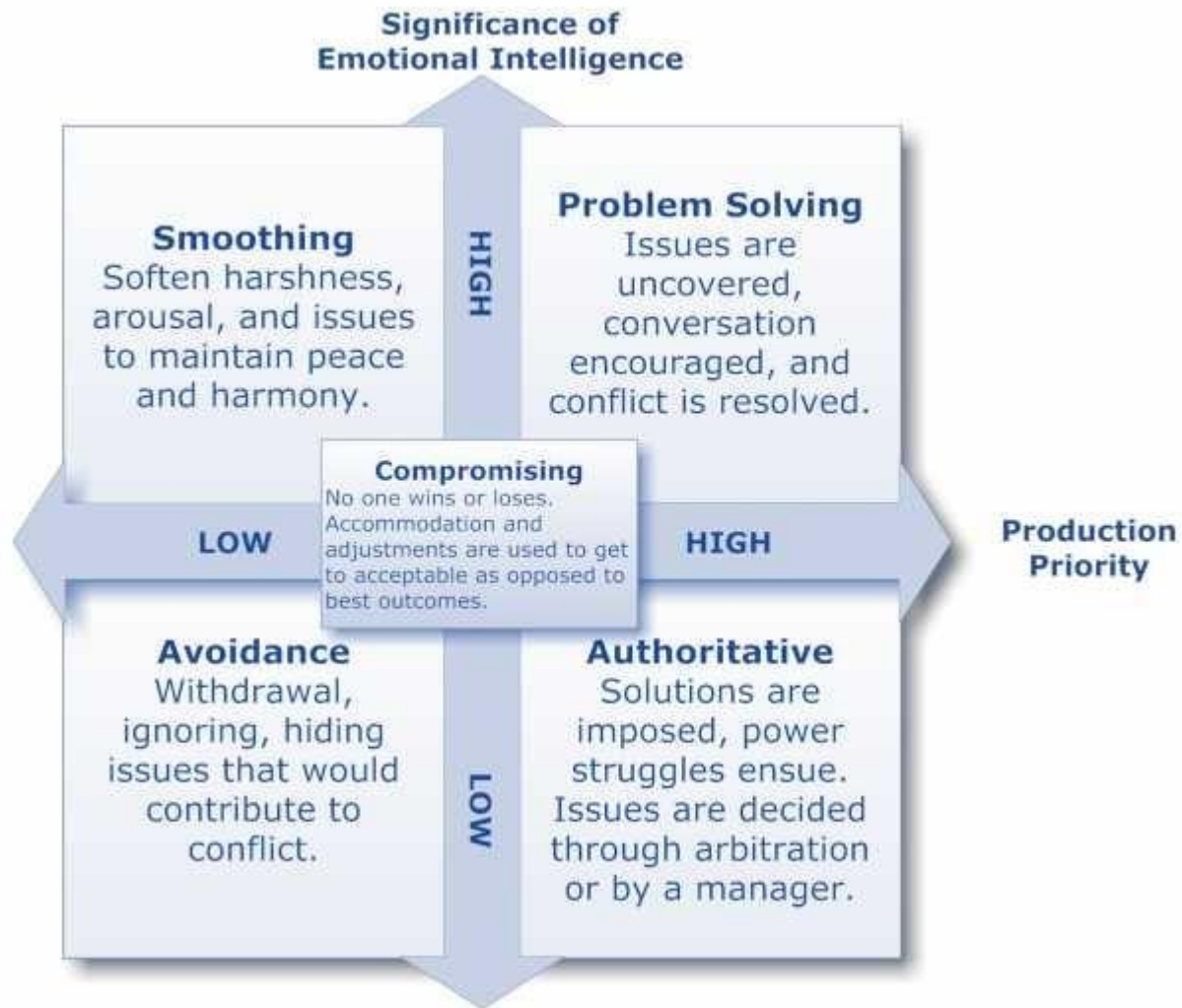
Now, transfer your scores for each question to the appropriate box below.

	Item 1	Item 2	Item 7	Total
Authoritative/Competitive				
	Item 8	Item 10	Item 13	Total
Problem Solving				
	Item 3	Item 5	Item 9	Total
Compromising				
	Item 4	Item 11	Item 14	Total
Avoiding				
	Item 6	Item 12	Item 15	Total
Smoothing				

The maximum score in each category is 12 points.

The Conflict Grid

Look at your three highest scores, and consider them with the descriptions below. For example, if you scored high in Avoidance, Smoothing, and Compromise, we would characterize you as having a “left of center” preference to dealing with conflict. Your desire is to meet the social, emotional, and relationship needs of people involved. If you scored higher in problem solving, authoritative command, and compromise, then you are more analytical in your approach, or may choose to assert your authority and impose a solution when conflict arises.



The conflict grid shows how each style demonstrates high or low emotional intelligence and commitment to the people involved, and low to high concern for the production targets within any area of responsibility. You'll see that only the problem-solving style scores high on both continuums; people and production. It is for this reason that we argue that it takes problem-solving strategies to achieve real conflict resolution. Problem-solving is an attempt to identify and work through the causes of conflict, not merely to suppress them temporarily.

Pros and Cons

For each style outlined above, identify the pros and cons of that style and when it might best be used.

Avoidance

Pros

Cons

When to Use

Authoritative Command/Competitive

Pros



Cons

When to Use

**Smoothing
Pros**

Cons



When to Use

**Compromising
Pros**

Cons

When to Use

**Problem-Solving
Pros**

Cons

When to Use

Further Reading:

- ✓ *Graham Scott, Gini. Disagreements, Disputes, and All-Out War: Three Simple Steps for Dealing with Any Kind of Conflict. AMACOM, 2007.*
- ✓ *Hamilton, Cheryl, and Cordell Parker. Communicating for Results. Wadsworth Publishing, 2007.*