

Moving through Conflict to Collaboration

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Every moment we interact with others, we are at risk of encountering conflict. As we set out to accomplish tasks and satisfy our needs each day, we inevitably find ourselves at odds with others who are pursuing their aims as intently as we are. In the face of limited time, space, energy, and resources, conflict is unavoidable. Success in fulfilling our goals and feeling satisfied in the process often depends on the way we go about handling conflict. This is especially important if we are working on complex projects that cannot be completed without the coordinated efforts of several individuals.

To the extent that we value competition over cooperation, we are likely to face an endless series of battles in which we lose some and win some. There is an alternative to this schema for those who are willing to envision conflict as the beginning of a collaborative process. This article is intended to support this possibility by exploring factors that contribute to conflict, styles of handling conflict, and approaches for resolving or managing conflict and promoting collaboration in the workplace.

Sources and Types of Conflict

While we share things in common with virtually everyone we meet, in moments of conflict it is tempting to focus mainly on the differences. In such situations, it is common for coworkers to reject each other's ideas, to feel unappreciated, to feel like withdrawing, or to overreact to a workmate's behavior. While these are normal temporary reactions, remaining in a reactive mode will generate a cascade of further negative impacts leading to discouragement for all involved. This can gravely affect the morale and performance of a work group.

Every member of a team brings a unique set of skills, interests, needs, concerns, interpretations, desired outcomes, and approaches to each task that must be completed. Each teammate also presents temperament and personality dynamics that play out in group projects. Some people are more moody than others. Some are robustly cheerful. Some are quite extraverted and deliver their best performance through active interplay with others. Some are introverted and require more time alone as a precondition to contributing their best. Some are great with details, some anticipate outcomes better than others, some are analytical, others are more naturally attentive to people's feelings and needs. Such differences can quickly become a source of conflict when they clash with our own tendencies.

For example, a work team may be discussing whether or not to seek training so the team can use a type of software that will make certain work tasks easier to accomplish. Some employees may feel that the current way of completing the job functions in question is sufficient and that the expense of the software and training is not justified. They may even speak out for better ways to spend the funds it would take for the software and training. Others who are more reliant on computer programs to complete their job tasks and who feel comfortable using various types of software may be excited by the prospect and argue strongly in favor of the idea. Still others may not care one way or the other and

prefer to be left out of the conversation, leaving the decision to a manager's discretion. These and other differences provide a variety of filters through which to view a given task and ways of moving it forward. By fostering a collaborative process in which all the possibilities are thoroughly considered and tested, it is more likely that a consensus can ultimately be reached and teamwork enhanced in the process.

Of course, we each bring our own personal sense of reality to any group effort. Innovative outcomes are dependent upon unique combinations of perspective and approach. Collaboration also requires that we develop a shared sense of reality. By cultivating common goals, values, and basic project management procedures at the outset of a team-based project, divergent perspectives can be more easily tolerated or embraced. Uniting around common ground is a framework that enhances a group's ability to resolve or respectfully manage differences when they inevitably arise. When such a group identity exists, computer savvy employees may be more patient with colleagues who are wary of new information technology applications. Those who wait for direction may also be more accepting of those who constantly press for change as long as all concerned feel their perspectives are being considered and valued.

Regardless of how prepared a team is to face conflict, various types of conflicts are sure to arise. Karen Jehn and her colleagues have identified three major types of workplace conflict (Jehn, 1997; Jehn & Mannix, 2001). These include *task*, *process*, and *relationship* conflicts.

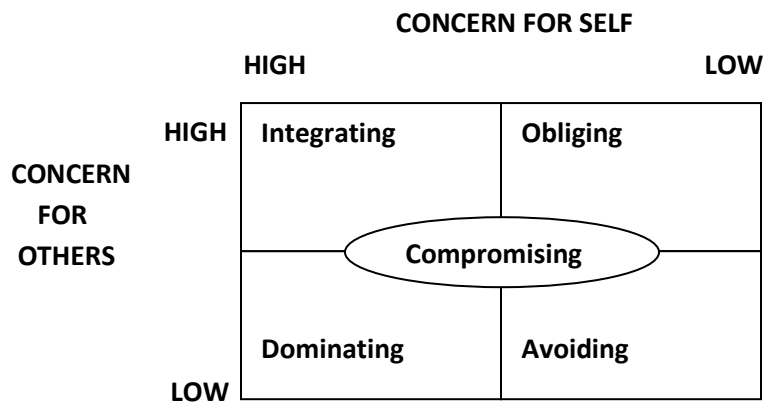
Task conflict involves differences centered on work details and goals. This type of conflict is often the easiest to address and resolve and "often enhances dialogue and debate regarding how work is conducted" (Lipsky & Avgar, 2008, p. 179). Such conflicts can result in "a better understanding of how things are actually done in the organization and the manner in which they should be done" (Lipsky & Avgar, 2008, p. 179).

Process conflict includes "controversies about aspects of how task accomplishment will proceed" (Jehn and Mannix, 2001, p. 238). This kind of conflict is considered to be distinctly different from the other two types and to operate on a whole other set of dynamics (Lipsky & Avgar, 2008). These usually concern disagreements about "how task accomplishment should proceed in the work unit, who's responsible for what, and how things should be delegated" (Jehn, 1997, p. 537). This type of conflict can be most productive when it is minimized by clearly defining goals, roles of participants, and task management procedures early on.

Relationship conflicts are those that arise over "disagreements and incompatibilities among group members regarding personal issues that are not task-related" (Jehn, Greer, Levine, & Szulanski, 2008, p. 467). This is often regarded as the most challenging type of conflict to deal with. Unresolved conflict of this nature has been found to undermine cohesion, trust, satisfaction, and performance of a work group. Recent research (Desivilya, Somech, & Lidgoster, 2010) has suggested that relationship conflict must be quickly detected and resolved. This study found that persistent relationship conflict to be negatively associated with the development of collaborative problem solving patterns in work teams. Many of the suggestions offered below are designed to address this type of conflict.

Styles of Handling Conflict

Generally people react to conflict situations by avoiding, going on the attack, or by seeking constructive, cooperative solutions. Arguably, most of us have responded in all these ways at one time or another depending upon circumstances and our level of well being in the moment. Aside from these transitory reactions, each person tends to rely on a particular style of dealing with conflict. Rahim and Magner (1995) have identified five styles of handling interpersonal conflict based upon the degree to which the concern for self and concern for others are considered (see diagram below).



Styles of Handling Interpersonal Conflict (Rahim & Magner, 1995, p. 123)

High levels of concern for self alongside low levels of concern for others constitute a *dominating style*. This style tends to guarantee “win-lose” outcomes because it is based on individuals in a work group striving to get their own way no matter how negative the impact may be on others or the outcome of the project. This style is often characterized by the use of power and threats which can result in the victor feeling positive while the vanquished are likely to suffer low morale and less commitment to related work tasks. An example may be an employee who insists that a blog established to seek customer input be discontinued because “most of the suggestions we’ve received have been really stupid.” As other teammates begin to present differing opinions such an individual may shout “we are just wasting time here people, this is a dumb idea, let’s move on!”

An *avoiding style* involves low levels of concern for both self and others. This style is associated with withdrawal from or sidestepping conflict issues. This approach may be helpful in the face of overwhelming conflict or when current conditions are likely to naturally dissipate over time. However, this orientation often leaves conflicts unresolved and over time, such the importance of such issues can become more aggravated and difficult to solve. For instance, after offering a suggestion for how to market a particular service, a team member might drop out of the conversation once alternative viewpoints have been introduced. After final decisions have been made this individual may offer tepid

support or even passive resistance having felt excluded from the process (by virtue of his or her own withdrawal).

When concern for another's needs exceeds the concern for one's own needs, this can lead to the use of an *obliging* style. A person who uses this style will tend to be highly cooperative and unassertive. Differences may be ignored while areas of common ground are emphasized. This can eventually lead to a lack of critical review of team outputs. For example, a task force member may readily agree with every idea proposed by an outspoken colleague or decline to offer his opinions for fear of arousing disapproval. Over time this person's perspective is likely to be ignored even if he is aware of vital information to which no one else on the team is privy. The accomplishments of the team may be compromised as a result.

A *compromising* style represents an intermediate level of self-advocacy and concern for others. While this may lead more easily to acceptable outcomes for all involved, there may be so many concessions on both sides that all parties are left feeling somewhat unsatisfied by the results achieved. Too much compromise can stifle innovation. For example, a team member may quickly agree to abandon her efforts to seek a promising grant she was excited to pursue because another member thinks it would take too much time. The other agrees in return to discontinue offering a service he feels passionate about because his co-worker doubts there are sufficient funds to support it. Further discussion and consideration of both team members' needs and interests may have led to a far superior result, but in this case, that possibility was sacrificed in the interest of being cooperative.

The *integrating* style refers to a genuine consideration of the concerns of all team members. In comparison with the other styles, this style has been associated with greater team innovation (Desivilya, Somech, & Lidgoster, 2010). Such an approach requires that everyone involved is willing to engage in a respectful exchange of ideas and information. For this to occur, each person must take responsibility for his or her role in working out solutions that honor the values and needs of all involved. This is the most collaborative style of managing conflict. A case in point would be a technical writer who implores the members of a design team to reconsider a decision to put a product on the market they have spent months developing. Based upon the difficulty she has encountered trying to write understandable instructions, she argues convincingly that the toy is likely to be exceedingly difficult for the average person to assemble. She listens carefully to their expressions of frustration and doubts about her assessment. She respectfully insists that they pre-assemble several parts for the good of the project. In the end, the product is much easier to assemble and becomes one of their best selling products.

Moving from Conflict to Collaboration

There are several ways we might begin to move from conflict to collaboration. Here are several to consider as you prepare to prevent or work through conflicts in your workplace.

Adjust your outlook. Examining our attitude toward conflict is an important first step. We are more likely to “transform” conflicts into collaborative conversations when we expect constructive changes to occur and are willing to actively engage in a process of working out integrative solutions (Lederach & Maiese, 2003).

Find common ground. Contribute to the development of a shared vision that is compelling to all group members and advocate for a division of labor that permits each participant to employ some of their best skills, knowledge, and interests. Point out emerging increments of agreement and progress toward mutually desired outcomes.

Build relationships. Even before agreeable solutions begin to emerge, it is important to notice and encourage earnest efforts by others to work cooperatively. Establish routine patterns of connection, such as starting each conversation by reviewing shared interests and areas of agreement.

Use two-way communication practices. When you begin a new team venture, present your positions and ideas using “I-statements” and open to others’ perspectives. Restate your best understanding of others’ points, values, and interests using key phrases they use. Ask for confirmation or correction. Request that others do the same.

Proceed in small steps. Stay focused on freshly emerging issues versus getting bogged down addressing more complex problems prematurely. Break bigger problems into sequential steps and tackle them one at a time.

Keep a broad perspective. When it is necessary to address differences, it is important to cultivate ways to recover from unpleasant conflict experiences. One way to do this involves acknowledging your contributions to difficulty and expressing a desire to get back on track. It can also be useful to occasionally discuss differences from a third person perspective (Gellerman, & O’Brien, 2006; Stone, Patton, & Heen, 1999), summarizing two different perspectives openly and without judgment the way a third party might describe them.

Manage your emotions. Before meeting with members of a work team with whom you have disagreements, it can be helpful to withdraw and calm yourself. As one might expect, the affect or feeling experienced during a conflict has been found to be a major predictor of the outcome of the conflict. Research by Barbara Fredrickson (2001) has indicated that the worse people feel in such situations, the less capable they are to consider options and pursue creative solutions. You might also prepare yourself for unpleasant emotional reactions others may experience, so you will be less likely to react in ways that are likely to worsen and perpetuate emotional reactivity. One way to strengthen this practice is to imagine a thick glass wall between you and the person who is upset and to focus mainly on your own feelings, thoughts, and actions without reacting. It is also important to seek common ground from the outset of a work project and to revisit this focus whenever emotional conflict emerges.

Be compassionate. When you encounter avoidant or adversarial reactions, remind yourself that everyone engages in some version of these patterns at times. Reflect on whether these reactions are fleeting or whether they represent a person’s characteristic style of handling conflict. People with

integrative or compromising styles may sometimes lapse into withdrawal or attack mode, even you! This tends to occur when someone is struggling to express what feels deeply important in terms that others will be able to understand. Anyone in this fix will tend to feel helpless and frustrated until it becomes possible to succeed in articulating one's perspective effectively.

Take breaks to regroup. When you suspect others are struggling in their efforts to express themselves, acknowledge it. You can open the door to mutual understanding and trust by saying something like, "It seems there is something really important you need to say about this. I propose we take a short break so you can organize your thoughts and I can clear my mind to listen so we can work this out together." You might even establish an agreement when your group meets for the first time to take breaks to regroup as needed. This can greatly improve everyone's chances of keeping a sense of perspective and maintain the capacity for creative problem solving. By being proactive, you are more likely to avoid the development of intractable conflicts from the outset.

Distinguish between intentions and impact. If you do become entangled in a heated exchange, you can begin to get back on track by differentiating between your intentions and the impact of your comments and actions. Mishandling these is one of the biggest factors leading to intractable conflicts. Claiming to know another's intentions inevitably ends in deadlocked conversations. Ignoring or denying the impact of your words and actions on others is also sure to lead to lose-lose situations. Conflict becomes more productive when all parties are willing and able to openly accept each other's reported intentions and to acknowledge unintentional negative impacts pointed out by others (Stone, Patton, & Heen, 1999).

As you finish reading this article, take a few moments to reflect on information that seemed most pertinent to your work situation. Consider a particular conflict that remains unresolved. What would you like to happen in the long run? How might your situation be improved in the short run? What are you willing to do to increase the likelihood of progress in this desired direction? What are a few first steps you might take? Are there approaches presented here that you would like to try? Try them out while these ideas are fresh in your mind. Track desirable changes you notice each week. Notice helpful actions, thoughts, or areas of focus you have been engaged in. Notice what the other has done that has helped. Acknowledge that support. What more could be done? Make a request. Ask what you have done that has been helpful. Ask if there is more you can do. Discuss ways to help each other co-create the work climate you both prefer to work in. Dwell on your shared vision.

Not everyone is willing to work through conflicts. If you face a teammate with a persistently domineering or avoiding style, it may be necessary to seek formal mediation or disciplinary action to address an intractable conflict. However, in most situations it is worthwhile to regard emerging conflict as a challenge to put your collaborative skills into action. Constructive conflict is a breeding ground for collaboration and both are essential to the development of effective work teams. With enough information, awareness, and practice, you can move through most of the differences you encounter and forge increasingly synergistic partnerships. I encourage you to take that challenge.

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