

The 5 types of organisational conflict

Understand, Identify, Engage

It's a normal Monday morning. Workers are going about establishing their priorities for the week. Everything seems to be settling into its usual routine, when a passing comment by one employee to another rapidly disintegrates into a loud and hostile debate on some seemingly banal matter of procedure. "What just happened?" is the question most likely to be asked by those not too close to the conflict. But it's also likely that the situation has been brewing for some time and there is much more beneath the surface than whatever is being expressed in the current argument. It is common for a manager to rush into a situation like this in with hopes of calming the situation and helping to solve it, but being informed of the mechanics of workplace conflict is essential to ensure that what the manager tries to do will address the real issues and not just the problems displayed on the surface.

Table 1: Types of Conflicting Goals	
Competitive	Where the parties' incompatibility is greater than their interdependence
Cooperative	Where the parties' interdependence is greater than their incompatibility
Enmity	Where there is a competition for socio-emotional superiority
Task	Where one party attempts conflict for material gain
<i>Source: Wang, Fink & Cai, 2012: 224</i>	

Where do problems come from?

Disagreements like this in workplaces are common: the very nature of discussing ideas and coming up with solutions to problems involves differing opinions being challenged and discussed. The question is whether—and how—the conflict can be positive and healthy. This starts at the hiring stage by noting individuals' communication styles and considering how different goals, interests and backgrounds may affect interpersonal relationships (Marra, 2012). Goals and priorities that are incompatible, being expressed by individuals who are interdependent with each other, are the foundations of every disagreement and conflict (see *Table 1*). Workplaces may have specific and formal rules for conflict resolution, but even

everyday disagreements have unwritten rules depending on the workplace, such as how direct or explicit someone should be when they disagree (Marra, 2012: 1580). More generally, conflict in the workplace is characterised by the “incompatibility of goals, incompatibility of actions, and perceived interdependence between the parties” (Wang, Fink & Cai, 2012: 224). What this means is that any conflict is a difference in priorities between two or more people who are interdependent, with the conflict being governed by formal and informal rules of engagement, as well as the different perceptions and personalities of those involved.

Put simply: unresolved conflict that is left unmanaged will get very messy, very fast.

Table 2: Some Types of Conflict	
Fundamental	Differences in priorities, approaches or ideas
Emotional	Inconsistency in information
Interpersonal	Conflicting views and goals between people
Group	Conflict between different groups in an organisation
Organisational	Conflict spread across an organisation
<i>Adapted from source: Seraji, Otouss, Deldar & Khah, 2013: 246</i>	

Disagreements: the grinding gears of interdependency

A start is to consider what a conflict or disagreement is. A “disagreement” can be defined as a form of negotiation; an expression of incompatible views between two or more people who are interdependent upon each other to reach those goals, and their inability or unwillingness to easily and completely reach an agreement where those goals are in conflict (Marra, 2012; Seraji, Otouss, Deldar & Khah, 2013). Many people think of disagreements as falling into various pop-psychology types like ‘creative conflict’, but researchers have found the differences to be more subtle and nuanced—and by extension, the likelihood of a disagreement being healthy or damaging to relationships is not as simple as asking whether the conflict is about task or personality.

Goals: The Engines of Conflict

Speaking of goals, there are several types which can be task-oriented or person-oriented; and of higher or lower priority than the relationship with the other person or task. This mix of

tasks and personalities can become quite heady and complicated. A conflict on a matter of procedure may be where one person (let's call him Jack) has prioritised his project over the other person (John's) project. Jack considers the relationship between himself and John a low priority; yet John is focussed on establishing his newfound authority and cares little for Jack's project. The banal argument over some matter of procedure is coloured by Jack approaching the issue as a project-driven one, while John is focussed on why he thinks Jack should acknowledge his authority. This situation can end up with accusations of project sabotage by Jack, competing against charges of insubordination by John. Untangling this mess is not as simple as determining fault or deciding who is "in the right" if you want to save both the relationships and projects involved. It takes understanding the types of conflict and conflicting goals to resolve this sort of disagreement (see *Table 2*).

Table 3: Goal Desirability and Approaches to Conflict			
		Concern for own goal attainment	
		Low	High
Concern for others' goal attainment	Low	Avoidance	Domination
	High	Accommodation	Integration

The level of concern for each party's goal attainment is what results in different types of approaches being adopted by each party: Domination, accommodation, integration and avoidance are the four main levels of strategy (see *Table 3*). Depending upon the mix between the parties, these approaches could resolve a conflict easily, or quite poorly. In addition to these four strategies, if the desirability for both one's own and others' goals is medium for both parties rather than low or high, then compromise is the likely outcome. This is why suggesting that all parties should aim for compromise when there is conflict can be counterproductive: you may find that you merely create a power struggle as both parties attempt to see whether the others' concern for their own goal is low or high, resulting in the conflict breaking out into attempts by both parties to dominate the other, or avoid the problems altogether, allowing them to fester (see *Illustration 1*).

Illustration 1: Conflict Strategies Continuum



Source: Marra, 2012: 1581

The danger of not addressing issues of conflict comprehensively is that it allows the issue and relationships to be damaged in the long-term with actions by one or several individuals such as withdrawal from the work or project, passive domination, pretending to comply, outflanking such as backstabbing, or exiting altogether by resigning (Wang, Fink & Cai, 229).

Common outcomes: Telling the conflicting parties to “reach a compromise” or to “sort it out themselves” will not help fix the problem and instead may exacerbate the problem. This may result in ongoing undesirable behaviours or even a ‘cold war’ which could return to open hostilities at a later stage over something totally unrelated.

Engaging: Preparing for Conflict Resolution

So what can be done? For a start, conflict resolution can only be begun once the conflict is understood:

Who is involved? **What** is involved? What are everyone’s **priorities**? Is it about **task**, **personality**, or **both**? What is the level of **interdependence** between the parties? How are the parties **approaching** the conflict?

To understand the nature of the conflict, consider each person involved:

- How direct are they being? Are they avoiding, changing the subject, or trying to negotiate?
- How explicit are they of their needs and goals and on what aspect of the conflict?
- Are they focussing on the individuals involved or on the tasks involved? What has priority?
- Are they focussing on their own or others’ needs?
- Is the language of the conflict using normal routine language or is it ad hoc? Is it attacking or defending?

- If the parties are from diverse backgrounds, is there a cultural, generational or other such aspect at play too?

It is important to be comprehensive here. Remember: a risk in conflict management is that failing to fully understand the mechanics of the conflict might result in a resolution attempt that only provides a surface solution.

Troubleshooting: A Hypothetical

Consider a hypothetical example (see *Illustration 2*): our two high-performing workers Jack and John are in conflict. Jack is primarily focussed on his project and, with little interest in the relationship with John, is attempting to avoid the conflict. John misinterprets that avoidance strategy as a sign that Jack considers his project low priority and John attempts to gain socio-emotional control through a show of his newfound authority. It should be clear that John is focussed on establishing a manager-employee relationship while Jack is focussed on the project and cares little for John's desire to be acknowledged as a superior. The two are at a similar level and not in the same department, so a compromise is unlikely in this situation. Failure to address this mismatch of focus and the misunderstanding of authority lines could result in actions like John attempting to dominate Jack, the two attempting to outflank each other, and even one or both exiting the organisation. You could address the surface issue of project-specific authority and thereby allow the conflict to continue under the surface, with the conflict constantly returning at inconvenient times. Even worse, their conflict could spread through a workplace or even organisation-wide. The incompletely resolved conflict could result in toxic work relationships that last as long as the tenure of the two individuals involved.

<i>Illustration 2: Conflict Hypothetical</i>		
	Jack	John
Conflicting Goals (table 1)	Competitive	Enmity
Types of conflict (table 2)	Fundamental	Interpersonal
Approaches (table 3)	Domination (task)	Domination (relationship)
Adopted Strategies (illustration 1)	Avoidance	Authority

Resolve the Perceptions, not just the conflict

Conflict can be positive or negative, but whether it improves or damages relationships and task effectiveness depends on a range of factors including the mechanics of the conflict itself as well as the approach by line managers and human resources practitioners to address it. O'Neill, Allen and Hastings (2013: 240) note that "interdependence naturally leads to some

level of conflict, but it is individuals' reaction to that conflict, in the form of cooperation, competition or avoidance, that is important for team effectiveness". Perhaps this is the best approach for human resources to take: expect conflicts, monitor them, and for those that do not resolve effectively, step in with an open mind prepared to comprehensively resolve them by focussing on the conflict as it's perceived by each party rather than as a single problem. Remember: conflicts are in the minds of individuals, and each individual has a different perspective of what the conflict is.

Want to be more effective at your conflict resolution in the workplace?

Working from the premise that conflict can be as much about perceptions as organisational priorities, tasks or personality many organisations find it useful to use internal climate surveys to "take the pulse" of a variety of issues which might be simmering away. As well as a preventative strategy for potential conflict and risk of undesired turnover, such surveys can be a wonderful opportunity for continuous improvement, to invite new ideas for innovation and to accelerate organisational success.

Be sure to ask about our [online Climate Surveys](#) - which actively reduces turnover and piques performance optimisation. Our survey reports provide you an overhaul of:

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