



Handling conflicts in organization- Emerging Facets of Management- Issues and Challenges

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The statistics of war are so appalling that they raise a question everyone ought to ask: are such levels of suffering, imposed by human beings on each other, really necessary? Aren't there better ways of managing and resolving the differences between people, and groups of people, which bring about war and violent conflict? Conflict is a characteristic of human existence. It is part of the dynamic of life that drives us into the future. But it needs to be managed constructively. When associated with violence, destruction and killing, it is no longer a healthy part of living. Violent conflict solves few problems, creates many, and breeds more unhealthy conflict to come.

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Introduction

Webster's Dictionary defines conflict as "a battle, contest of opposing forces, discord, antagonism existing between primitive desires, instincts and moral, religious, or ethical ideals."

Red Flags of Conflict

- Body language
- Disagreements, regardless of issue
- Withholding bad news
- Surprises
- Strong public statements
- Airing disagreements through media
- Conflicts in value systems
- Desire for power
- Increasing lack of support
- Open disagreement
- Lack of candor on budget problems or other sensitive issues
- Lack of clear goals
- No discussion of progress, failed goals, and inability to evaluate leaders fairly, thoroughly.

Many people think of conflict as negative. But conflict can be both negative AND positive.

Conflict is negative when it...

- Takes attention away from other activities
- Damages the spirit of the team or an individual
- Divides people and groups, and makes cooperation difficult
- Makes people or group focus on their differences
- Leads to harmful behavior, like fighting or name-calling

But it can be positive or constructive when it...

- Clears up important problems or issues
- Brings about solutions to problems
- Gets everyone involved in solving issues
- Causes real communication
- Release emotion, anxiety, and stress in a positive way
- Helps people learn more about each other and cooperate
- Develops understanding and skills.

Underlying causes of conflict

The way a society is organized can create both the root causes of conflict and the conditions in which it's likely to occur. Any society which is organized so that some people are treated unequally and unjustly is likely to erupt into conflict especially if its leaders don't represent all the members of that society. If an unequal and unjust society is reformed, then conflicts will be rare.

Human beings have basic needs. Everyone needs to be recognized as an individual with a personal identity; everyone needs to be able to feel safe. If these needs aren't met, people protest, and protesting can lead to rebellion and violence. Many people find their identity and security in their cultural group and its particular point of view - so clashes between different cultural groups also lead to disputes that can easily turn violent. If people learn to understand that differing cultures are not inevitably a threat to each other, they will also learn how to manage their differences co-operatively and peacefully.

One aspect of culture is particularly important: it can create language and behavior that excludes people, creating 'us/them', 'insider/outsider' situations and using language of discrimination, intolerance and hate. If people create a society that doesn't see 'difference' and 'diversity' as problems but as valuable for social growth, many causes of conflict disappear.

The issues of conflict

NOTE: Because we are concentrating on conflict that is expressed in group violence and war, the issues we mention will mostly be those that arise between peoples and nations. But they can all be translated into local terms, to match the conflicts that you may know about personally.

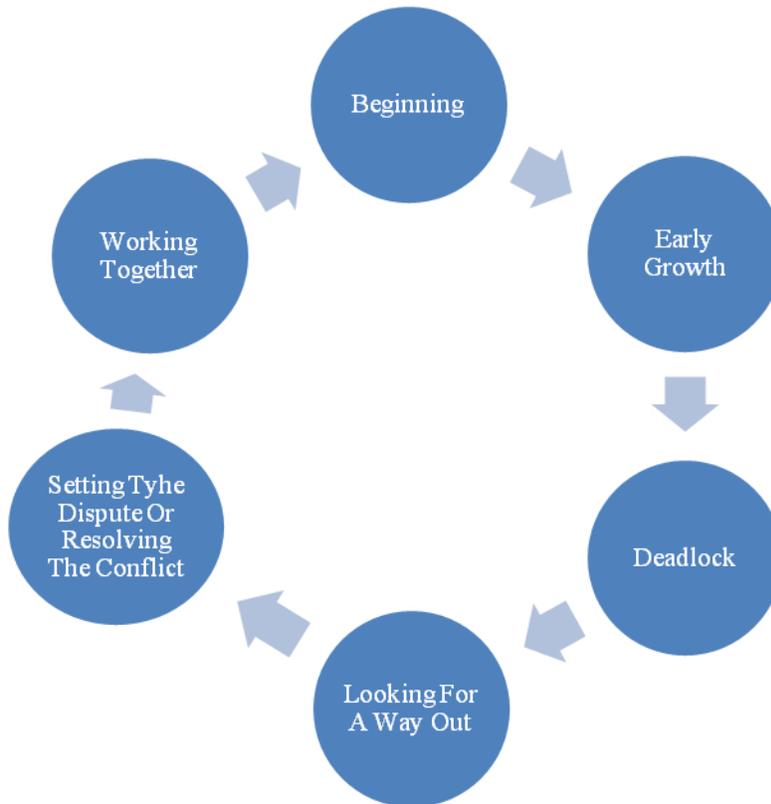
1. Conflicts arise when people are competing for the same resources (such as territory, jobs and income, housing) when they aren't fairly distributed or when there aren't enough to go round. The same applies to natural resources (cultivable land, fresh water).

2. Conflicts arise when the people are unhappy with how they are governed. The most common conflicts occur when a particular group wants to be independent from a central government, or when their viewpoint isn't represented in the government, or when the government oppresses them and doesn't respect or meet their basic needs.
3. Conflicts arise when people's beliefs clash. Religious and political views are particularly sensitive, because people often depend on these for a sense of identity and belonging. Sometimes the conflict is caused by a religious/political group being attacked; sometimes it is because the group is eager to spread a particular belief and even enforce it on others. Some leaders may aggravate religious and political differences as part of their tactics for keeping or gaining power.
4. In the same way ethnic differences can cause conflict, or be made to cause it. Again, people's ethnicity gives them a sense of identity and belonging, and it is threats to this sense which can cause violent responses, just as individuals may lash out with angry words or gestures when they feel threatened.

Indeed, conflicts of all kinds most frequently arise when people feel threatened - regardless of whether the threat is real. It is harder to soothe and reassure people when they are frightened or angry.

The life-cycle of a conflict

Conflicts are processes, a cluster of events taking time to evolve and reshape. They are always complicated - after all, they are part of the complex lives of human beings. But there are distinct stages which conflicts have in common, through which they pass, sometimes over and over again.



Life-cycle 1. Beginning

A conflict begins to take shape as the differences between the conflicting parties become clearly defined and people begin to take sides openly. The language of 'us and them' starts being widely used, and the idea of a 'cause' to support emerges on both sides. There is no violence at this point.

If a society is strong and its leaders enlightened, a conflict can be dealt with in a constructive and positive way at this stage, and violence and a worsening situation can be avoided.

Life-cycle 2. Early growth

But if there are no existing ways of dealing with social tensions and divisions, the conflict grows worse. The two sides express open hostility, so that 'us and them' now become 'the enemy' to each other. Each side increases its demands, and its sense of grievance swells. Each side looks for allies from outside the conflict area, for moral and physical support. Acts of violence begin. If violence is not repressed, the opposing sides hit back at one another and a destructive and deadly spiral begins.

If one of the sides has greater forces (as governments backed by armies do, for example, when suppressing civilian opposition) it may at this stage suppress its opponents, but the underlying causes of conflict remain to break out another day.

Life-cycle 3. Deadlock

Now the two sides are openly at war. Each side perceives the other as the aggressor on whom blame for the conflict falls. Each side regards itself as having the just cause. The lawlessness of war takes over, as inhibitions and restraints on violence are abandoned. Three possible situations can now be reached:

- (a) A stalemate with each side matching the other in violence
- (b) A surge of violence on one side
- (c) Exhaustion of strength and resources on both sides (this has been called 'a mutually-hurting stalemate').

Situation (a) continues the spiral of violence, or may halt it at a particular level which both sides keep up.

Situation (b) can make a change: for example, one side's increased power may cause the other side to change its tactics. The conflict may return to earlier stages and repeat them. If a side now decides to withdraw, the conflict remains unresolved and is likely to begin again later.

Situation (c) is the position from which the conflict can most readily move to its next stage.

Life-cycle 4. Looking for a way out

If and when the conflict reaches a stage where both sides are unhappy with the state of things - many losses, dwindling resources, no achievable 'result' - they may enter into ceasefire agreements. These provide a pause, which is often used for resting and regrouping before embarking on the earlier stages again. Sooner or later, however, both sides decide that ending the conflict is a problem they must both solve, though it has to be done without loss of face. At this point a third party can be introduced to mediate and negotiate. This can be done, at first, without the leaders of the two sides having to meet each other.

Life-cycle 5. Settling the dispute or resolving the conflict?

Settlements involve compromise, often with bitter arguments over what the compromises will be. They seldom lead to a solution in which the two sides can collaborate to establish a firm peace. Settlements establish ways in which either side is prepared to end conflict at least for the time being.

Conflict resolution, however, looks at the underlying causes which started the conflict and deals with them, so that the risks of future conflict are removed, or initially reduced. Both sides join together to achieve this outcome.

Complete resolution of a conflict is difficult after such great hostility, but may be reached after the passage of healing time if everyone has this aim.

Life-cycle 6. Working together

Now the agreement has to be put into effect. Both sides need to create new order together, rebuilding homes, restoring jobs and education, establishing enlightened management/government, disarming fighters and allowing refugees to return home. Even more

important, the two sides have to face up to the past, share their grief's, and reconcile their differences. This needs sensitivity, courage, and, above all, immense patience.

Handling conflict in organisation

A great deal of research has been and is being done to find the best ways of dealing nonviolently with conflicts in all their stages, whether they are interpersonal, local, national or international. All kinds of techniques and practices have been developed and are being tried out. The aim is to transform conflicts from destructive forces into violence-free, constructive ones. This approach is new. It focuses on the underlying, deep-rooted causes of conflict, and looks for solutions to them.

Most techniques for handling conflict involve the intervention of individuals or teams of individuals who aren't involved in the dispute themselves. How they intervene depends on the stage that the conflict has reached, and on their particular skills.

It also depends on who they are. Locally, you may already know people who have intervened in domestic and group disputes: they are likely to be people respected by all sides whose job it is to help sort out such problems. In community and international conflict, some interveners are voluntary peace workers or members of aid agencies. Some are from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and support agencies. In international conflicts, some interveners are diplomats from other countries, or representatives of international organisations such as the European Union (EU) or the United Nations (UN). Neutral members of the region in conflict also have a part to play.

Handling conflict 1. Prevention

Some peace-makers and teams concentrate on spotting areas in which conflict looks likely to break out, and then monitoring them closely. At the same time they help the conflicting sides to work out their disputes without use of violence.

Although this work may well prevent the outbreak of violence and the spiral into all-out war that can follow, it cannot resolve the conflict until the underlying causes have been dealt with. This requires long-term projects to identify the causes correctly and provide the sort of support needed to put things right. The right kind of support also needs to be imaginatively perceived and given. (One kind of support, of course, is training in peaceful problem-solving.)

At the moment (2001), there simply aren't enough skilled and committed people available to do this kind of work world wide. It's also difficult, at present, for those who are at work on conflict prevention to make them heard where it counts. Better links between teams, and more effective ways of acting quickly to prevent violence, have yet to be devised.

Handling conflict 2: crisis management

If violence is imminent but hasn't yet broken out, an intervener acceptable to both sides has a chance to remind them of the destructive risks they are running, and to express anxiety that nobody gets hurt. Again, this approach may halt the drift towards violence, but the issues

disputed have not been dealt with: violence may still break out at a later date.

If violence has already taken hold, then the interveners' work is primarily an effort to keep it to a minimum and to deal with the damage it is causing. But interveners can also make sure that news of the conflict, and information about it, is spread.

In the past, outside intervention at this stage has often been military, which may sometimes seem effective in the short-term. In fact military intervention causes long-term (and sometimes irreparable) damage and makes the conflict much harder to resolve. The introduction of armed intervention simply adds another combatant to the conflict and reinforces the mistaken idea that violence can resolve it. A conflict halted by violence retains all its problems and causes, now added to and made worse by death and destruction.

Handling conflict 3: short-term settlements

When a conflict has reached the stage of deadlock, the task of interveners is to establish trust with the leaders of both sides and to gain their confidence. Leaders are encouraged to talk to neutral consultants in conflict management, freely, frankly and in private. As a result they may be prepared to consider mediation.

The task of mediators is to set up a situation in which a settlement can be discussed. Perhaps surprisingly, it's been found that non-neutral mediators can be as effective as neutral ones; what matters is that they are skilled.

Official representatives of national or global powers may also intervene. They may offer inducements to both sides, such as financial aid, to persuade them to abandon violence; or they may make threats, such as economic sanctions, to get the same result.

Some conflicts 'go to arbitration'. This means that the dispute is studied by an independent individual or group, who act like a judge in a law court: they decide how the conflict can be fairly and justly settled, and the conflicting sides may be bound by law to accept the terms. Once again, however, although the underlying causes of the conflict may have been defined, they haven't been dealt with. Settlements and ceasefires may be achieved, but they are quite likely to collapse. Ceasefires in particular give all the sides a chance to rest and re-arm to fight another day. But they can also provide a period in which more long-term solutions can be discussed.

Handling conflict 4: long-term solutions

When the conflict has reached the stage when the disputants are ready to look at other options than violence, real negotiations can begin. They need to be carefully prepared for. The confidence of both sides must be gained, so that they not only come to the negotiation table but are willing to co-operate when they get there. Another step is making sure that skilled interveners are in place throughout the war zone, to help locally in bringing the violence to an end. Links between the people involved in the peace process and the people in power must be made firm and steady. This period is a tense one: there are always risks that violence will escalate again. The problems that caused the conflict have not gone away, and now they are aggravated by

feelings of vengeance and anger created by the destructiveness of the war.

Once negotiation there are indeed many answers, all valuable contributions to peace-building. There are perhaps four that ought to appear in any list:

1. The root causes of the conflict must be understood and plans made to do something about them.
2. Leaders and people on all sides must be sure that the peace process is 'theirs', not other people's ideas and wishes imposed on them.
3. A realistic and practical timetable for winding down the conflict needs to be agreed by everyone involved.
4. Everyone must be committed to making the peace process work.

The interveners' work isn't over yet. Where there are difficulties, they can talk to the leaders, clarifying important issues and acting as a link between them (and between them and local leaders) if communications break down. Other experts can, and increasingly do, set up organised 'problem-solving workshops' to help all sides to unrests are under way, what do they need to achieve?

The conflict, the various points of view, and consider a whole raft of possible solutions. Advanced problem-solving means looking at the conflict and its solutions in the light of human needs - a perspective that helps the combatants to come together in a joint effort to put things right. This begins with patiently establishing the aims that they can share.

Culture can be defined as 'the total range of beliefs, values, ideas and activities of a group of people with shared traditions'. The importance of culture is enormous. Culture conditions people's understanding and perception of language, behaviour and events - which means that cultural differences can lead to misinterpretation and misunderstanding. In some parts of the world, a cultural approach to conflict resolution is often more successful than any other. In these cases, interveners and peace-builders look for cultural lines of communication that already exist and send messages of problem-solving, nonviolence and hope along them. In other parts of the world, conflict solving is best helped by mediators from within the conflict, who already have the trust of their own group and understanding of the prevailing culture. The aim is never to suppress cultural differences, but to build on them towards a nonviolent future that benefits everyone.

Handling conflict 5: guidelines

1. Creating peace, like conflict, like life, is a process. It takes time. Building trust between people at war with each other takes time, and it may need to be very gradual indeed. Every small step towards trust-building is of value for future peace.
2. When people start talking to each other about ending the conflict, this too is the start of a process. Nothing can be solved overnight. So first it's a good idea to talk about talking: Where shall we talk? What about? In what order? Ideas from all sides should be promised a hearing.

3. Destructive conflicts make destructive changes. The destructive changes made to a society in conflict need to be understood, acknowledged and mended before the process towards a lasting peace can advance.

4. If a conflict is to be lastingly resolved, constructive social changes may be needed to make sure that everyone is treated fairly and justly.

Handling conflict 6: looking ahead

We've already said that there aren't yet enough skilled interveners, mediators, negotiators, peace-builders at work to help groups at war to solve their problems. There's another problem: those who are already at work are not yet a fully co-ordinate organisation. There are many different peace-building groups, many different approaches, and many different timescales. Variety is a good thing, but the experience and knowledge needs to be shared. A coherent overall network with good communications is needed so that everyone knows what everyone else is doing and the work isn't duplicated unnecessarily.

This is where the idea of coalition comes in. A coalition is an alliance of people or groups working together for a shared purpose. Political coalitions quickly encounter problems, because every member wants to lead. But social coalitions aren't interested in power: they work for the common good of everyone.

If the different groups, institutions and individuals already working for the peaceful resolution of conflict form coalitions, then a peace-building network begins to take shape. Where there is a strong network of strong relationships, war is less likely to recur. It means a coalition of interveners too: members of this young and exciting profession have a lot to communicate and a lot to learn from each other, all round the world. As they do, a 'culture of peace' can begin to grow and spread, crossing all boundaries and enriching all lives.