



ORGANISATION  
DEVELOPMENT  
RESOURCES

## Creating Collaboration from Conflict



How to keep your cool, stand your ground  
and reach a positive resolution.

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## CREATING COLLABORATION FROM CONFLICT

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# How to get the most from this workshop

## During the workshop...

- Participate! Contribute to the discussion, if you are participating in the workshop version of this program.
- Do the exercises described in this learner guide. Your facilitator will lead you through them during the program.
- If you are taking part in this program, share your questions or comments with the workshop facilitator and your colleagues.
- Take notes. Jot down ideas on how you can apply today's information to your own workplace.

## After the workshop...

- Practice the Post-Workshop Exercises described in this training learner guide.

Throughout the workshop you are encouraged to discuss issues with colleagues, seek advice and clarification. If you cannot find the information that you need – ask. It may be that you are the person that has realised it is missing! The workbook should build into an information resource for you, so it is important that you discuss your answers and progress during supervision sessions.

**You will notice this symbol is used throughout the unit:**



**Represents an exercise to complete from the workbook.**

# INTRODUCTION

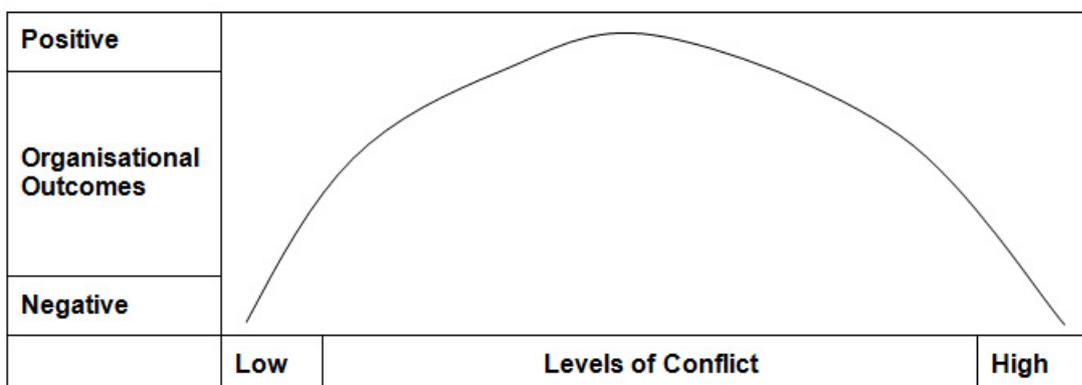
One of the leading causes of business failure among major corporations is too much agreement among top management. They have similar training and experience, which leads to a tendency to view conditions and situations within the organisation the same way and pursue similar goals. Members are either too homogenous that they fail in competitive environments or they are ill equipped to adapt to changing environmental conditions.

Interpersonal conflict is normal, essential and a manageable part of organisational life. Given the range of diversity, change and team based approaches in Australian workplaces, conflicts are inevitable. When people with differing approaches and backgrounds work together, misunderstandings and disagreements are to be expected. Some conflict is the lifeblood of vibrant, progressive, stimulating organisations. It sparks creatively, stimulates innovation and encourages personal improvement.

Many managers tend to be uncomfortable with conflict at work but it is part of our essential humanity. In addition, many people in general have a low tolerance for disagreement. Whether this is the result of family background, cultural values or personality characteristics, a high level of interpersonal conflict saps their energy and demoralises their spirit.

Some types of conflict, regardless of frequency, generally produce dysfunctional outcomes. These include petty personality conflicts and arguments over things that can not be changed. When conflict becomes chronic and splits teams, it reduces morale and directly reduces productivity. This is especially the case when conflict is stimulated for self-serving purposes. For example, some managers feel so unsure of their qualifications and support that they continually stir up conflicts between employees. This reduces the threat of a coalition forming to challenge the boss's rule and creates situations that reaffirm the boss's superior position. This is a classic case of using a natural, legitimate organisational process for contrived, illegitimate personal purposes. Fortunately, this tends to be the exception not the rule in management practice.

**Figure 1: Relationship between level of conflict and organisational outcomes**



# CONFLICT

Conflict is a disagreement through which the parties involved perceive a threat to their needs, interests or concerns. Within this simple definition there are several important understandings that emerge:

## Disagreement

Generally, we are aware there is some level of difference in the positions of the two (or more) parties involved in the conflict. But the true disagreement versus the perceived disagreement may be quite different from one another. In fact, conflict tends to be accompanied by significant levels of misunderstanding that exaggerate the perceived disagreement considerably. If we can understand the true areas of disagreement, this will help us solve the right problems and manage the true needs of the parties.

## Parties involved

There are often disparities in our sense of who is involved in the conflict. Sometimes, people are surprised to learn they are a party to the conflict, while other times we are shocked to learn we are not included in the disagreement. On many occasions, people who are seen as part of the social system (e.g. work team, family, company) are influenced to participate in the dispute, whether they would personally define the situation in that way or not. People can readily "take sides" based upon current perceptions of the issues, past issues and relationships, roles within the organisation and other factors. The parties involved can become an elusive concept to define.

## Perceived threat

People respond to the perceived threat, rather than the true threat, facing them. Thus, while perception doesn't become reality per se, people's behaviours, feelings and ongoing responses become modified by that evolving sense of the threat they confront. If we can work to understand the true threat (issues) and develop strategies (solutions) that manage it (agreement), we are acting constructively to manage the conflict.

## Needs, interests or concerns

There is a tendency to narrowly define "the problem" as one of substance, task and near-term viability. However, workplace conflicts tend to be far more complex than that, for they involve ongoing relationships with complex, emotional components. Simply stated, there are always procedural needs and psychological needs to be addressed within the conflict, in addition to the substantive needs that are generally presented. The durability of the interests and concerns of the parties transcends the immediate presenting situation. Any efforts to resolve conflicts effectively must take these points into account.

Within the definition's elegant simplicity lies a complex set of issues to address. Therefore, it is not surprising that satisfactory resolution of most conflicts can prove so challenging and time consuming to address. The following points illustrate how complex the issue of conflict can be:

- A conflict is more than a mere disagreement - it is a situation in which people **perceive a threat** (physical, emotional, power, status, etc.) to their well-being. As such, it is a meaningful experience in people's lives, not to be shrugged off by a mere, "it will pass..."
- Participants in conflicts tend to **respond on the basis of their perceptions of the situation**, rather than an objective review of it. As such, people filter their perceptions (and reactions) through their values, culture, beliefs, information, experience, gender and other variables. Conflict responses are both filled with ideas and feelings that can be very strong and powerful guides to our sense of possible solutions.
- As in any problem, **conflicts contain substantive, procedural and psychological dimensions** to be negotiated. In order to best understand the threat perceived by those engaged in a conflict, we need to consider all of these dimensions.
- Conflicts are normal experiences within the work environment. They are also, to a large degree, **predictable and expectable situations that naturally arise** as we go about managing complex and stressful projects in which we are significantly invested. As such, if we develop procedures for identifying conflicts likely to arise, as well as systems through which we can constructively manage conflicts, we may be able to discover new opportunities to transform conflict into a productive learning experience.
- **Creative problem-solving strategies are essential** to positive approaches to conflict management. We need to transform the situation from one in which it is 'my way or the highway' into one in which we entertain new possibilities that have been otherwise elusive.

## SOURCES OF CONFLICT

Managers often behave as though serious interpersonal confrontations are the result of personality defects. They may label those who are frequently involved in conflicts as 'troublemakers' or 'poor performers' and attempt to ignore, transfer or dismiss them as a way of resolving conflict. While some individuals seem to have a propensity for making trouble and appear to be reactive under even the best of circumstances, 'personality problems' actually account for only a small percentage of organisational conflicts.

When staff are asked the causes of their poor performance, they generally explain it in terms of problems in their environment, such as poor management, insufficient support or unco-operative co workers. While some face saving may be involved here, this suggests that managers need to guard against the assumption that 'bad behaviour' implies 'bad people'. In fact aggressive or harsh behaviours sometimes observed in interpersonal confrontations often reflect the frustrations of people who have good intentions but are unskilled in handling intense, emotional experiences.

In contrast to the personality – defect theory of conflict, the following four explanations are proposed:

**TABLE 1: Sources of Conflict**

Sources of Conflict	Focus of Conflict
1. personal differences;	1. perceptions and expectations
2. information processes;	2. misinformation and misrepresentation
3. role incompatibility; and	3. goals and responsibilities
4. environmental stress	4. resources and conditions

## Personal Differences

Individuals bring different backgrounds to their roles in organisations. Their values and needs have been shaped by different socialisation processes, depending on their cultural and family traditions, level of education, breadth of experience, gender, age and so forth. As a result, their interpretations of events and their expectations about relationships with others in the organisation will vary considerably. Conflicts stemming from incompatible personal values and needs are some of the most difficult (and challenging) to resolve. They often become highly emotional and take on moral overtones. A disagreement about who is factually correct easily turns into a bitter argument over who is morally right.

Conflicts about right and fact also arise out of people's different nonverbal behaviour as well as their internal mind-sets and expectations.



## Information Processes

Conflicts may also result from deficiencies in the organisation's communication systems. An important message may not be received, a boss's instructions may be misinterpreted, or decision makers may arrive at different conclusions because of different databases. Conflicts based on misinformation or misunderstanding can be minimised by clarifying previous messages or obtaining additional information. This generally resolves the dispute. This might entail rewording the boss's instructions, reconciling contradictory sources of data or redistributing copies of misplaced messages. This type of conflict is common in organisations, but it is also fairly easy to resolve. Once the breakdown in the information system is repaired disputants are generally able to resolve their disagreement with a minimum of resentment.

Diversity in our backgrounds can greatly add to informational difficulties. The increasing use of e-mail also provides another complexity to this area. The speed of e-mail and ease of copying material to others magnifies small misunderstandings very quickly.

## Role Incompatibility

The complexity inherent in most organisations tends to produce conflict between members whose tasks are interdependent but whose roles are incompatible. This type of conflict is exemplified by the classic goal conflicts between Line Management and Staff, Production and Sales, Marketing and Research and Development. Each unit has different responsibilities in the organisational goals (e.g.; customer satisfaction, product quality, production efficiency, compliance with government regulations). It is also typical of firms whose multiple product lines compete for scarce resources. Role confusion and conflict is also inherent in delayed organisations and in the development of work teams.

Role incompatibility conflicts may overlap with those arising from personal differences or information difficulties. The personal differences that staff bring to an organisation generally remain dormant until they are triggered by an organisational catalyst, such as interdependent task responsibilities. One reason members often perceive that their assigned roles are incompatible is that they are operating from different bases of information. They communicate with different sets of people, are tied into different reporting systems and receive information from different team leaders.

## Environmental Stress

Another major source of conflict is environmentally induced stress. Conflict stemming from personal differences and role incompatibilities are greatly exacerbated by a stressful environment. When an organisation is forced to operate on an austere budget, its members are more likely to become embroiled in disputes over domain claims and resource requests. Scarcity tends to lower trust, increase selfishness and reduce participation in decision making.

These are ideal conditions for incubating interpersonal conflict. Poor working conditions and unsafe work practices also produce stress and injury.

Uncertainty is also another environmental condition that fosters conflict. When individuals find it difficult to predict what is going to happen to them from month to month, they become very anxious and prone to conflict. This type of 'frustration conflict' often stems from rapid, repeated change. If task assignments, management philosophy, accounting procedures and lines of authority are changed frequently, employees find it difficult to cope with the resulting stress and sharp, bitter conflicts can easily erupt over seemingly trivial problems. This type of conflict is generally intense, but it dissipates quickly once a change becomes routine and individuals' stress levels are lowered.

# POSITION VERSUS INTEREST

**Position** = what you want (vehicle)

**Interest** = why you want it (cargo); your motivation or reason

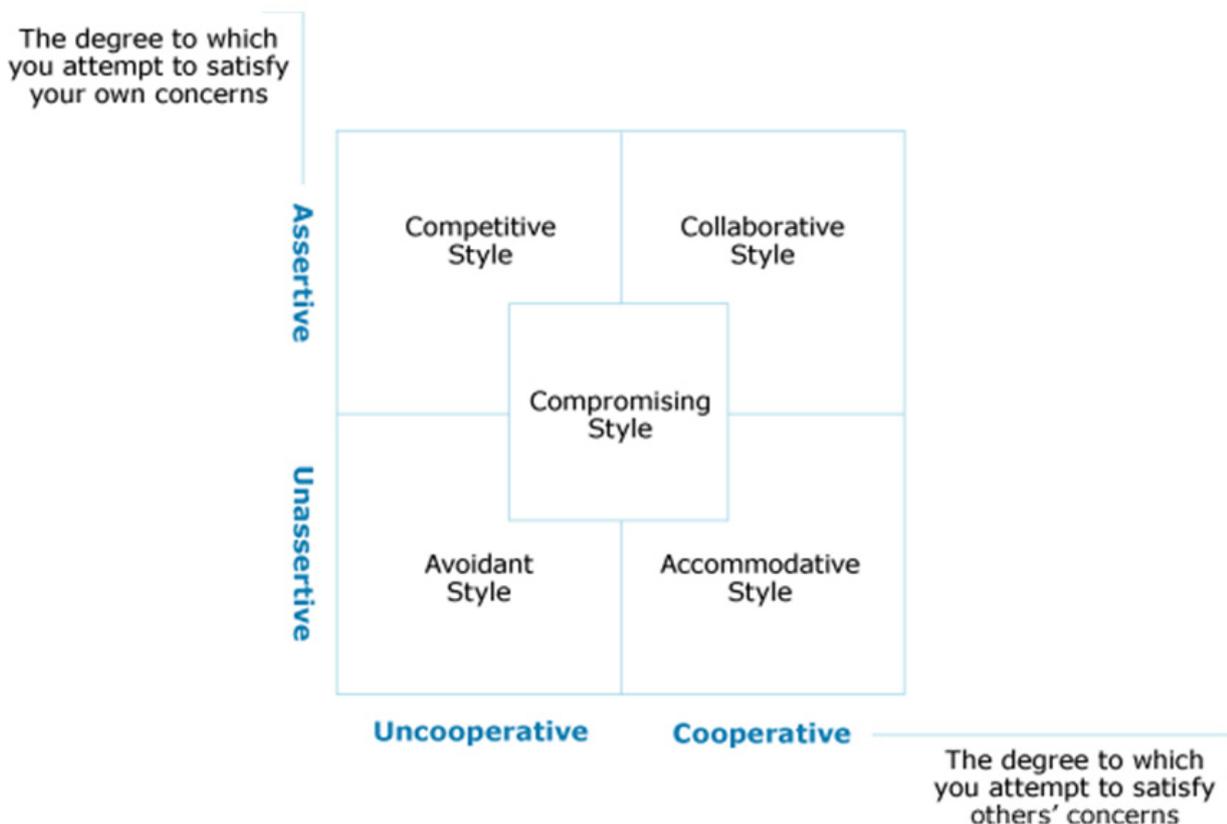
It's important to talk about interests, not positions. If you focus on interests, you might find you have some of the same interests and some that are different. You might discover there are many vehicles (positions) to transport your cargo (satisfy your interests) to where you want it to be.

From Dean G. Pruitt and Jeffrey Z. Rubin. Social Conflict. Escalation, Stalemate and Settlement © 1986 by Newberry Award Records, Inc. Reprinted by permission of McGraw Hill, Inc.

## CONFLICT STYLES

Conflict is often best understood by examining the consequences of various behaviours at moments in time. These behaviours are usefully categorised according to conflict styles. Each style is a way to meet one's needs in a dispute but may impact other people in different ways.

- **Competing** is a style in which one's own needs are advocated over the needs of others. It relies on an aggressive style of communication, low regard for future relationships and the exercise of coercive power. Those using a competitive style tend to seek control over a discussion, in both substance and ground rules. They fear that loss of such control will result in solutions that fail to meet their needs. Competing tends to result in responses that increase the level of threat.



- **Accommodating**, also known as smoothing, is the opposite of competing. Persons using this style yield their needs to those of others, trying to be diplomatic. They tend to allow the needs of the group to overwhelm their own - which may not ever be stated - as preserving the relationship is seen as most important.
- **Avoiding** is a common response to the negative perception of conflict. "Perhaps if we don't bring it up, it will blow over," we say to ourselves. But, generally, all that happens is that feelings get pent up, views go unexpressed and the conflict festers until it becomes too big to ignore. Like a cancer that may well have been cured if treated early, the conflict grows and spreads until it kills the relationship. Because needs and concerns go unexpressed, people are often confused, wondering what went wrong in a relationship.
- **Compromising** is an approach to conflict in which people gain and give in a series of tradeoffs. While satisfactory, compromise is generally not satisfying. We each remain shaped by our individual perceptions of our needs and don't necessarily understand the other side very well. We often retain a lack of trust and avoid risk-taking involved in more collaborative behaviours.
- **Collaborating** is the pooling of individual needs and goals toward a common goal. Often called "win-win problem-solving," collaboration requires assertive communication and cooperation in order to achieve a better solution than either individual could have achieved alone. It offers the chance for consensus, the integration of needs and the potential to exceed the "budget of possibilities" that previously limited our views of the conflict. It brings new time, energy and ideas to resolve the dispute meaningfully

By understanding each style and its consequences, we may recognise and evaluate the behaviours in various conflict situations. This is not to say, "Thou shalt collaborate" in a moralising way, but to indicate the expected consequences of each approach: If we use a competing style, we might force the others to accept 'our' solution, but this acceptance may be accompanied by fear and resentment. If we accommodate, the relationship may proceed smoothly, but we may build up frustrations that our needs are going unmet. If we compromise, we may feel OK about the outcome, but still harbour resentments in the future. If we collaborate, we may not gain a better solution than a compromise might have yielded, but we are more likely to feel better about our chances for future understanding and goodwill. In addition, if we avoid discussing the conflict at all, both parties may remain clueless about the real underlying issues and concerns, only to be dealing with them in the future.

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