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## ABSTRACT

*Conflict is the normal outcome of human interaction. Individuals react to conflict in a variety of ways based upon prior situations in which they may have experienced anger, hostility, violence, stress, or fear. Conflicts can escalate if proper conflict management techniques are not utilized. We must learn to accept human differences as inevitable, value rather than reject them, and learn how to resolve conflict and handle confrontations effectively. Understanding conflict and achieving "win-win" solutions can be productive both personally and professionally.*

## Conflict: What It Is and How It Can Be Managed

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### INTRODUCTION

In the turbulent and sometimes violent culture of the 1990s the effective resolution of conflict is foremost in the minds of many professionals. In people-oriented professions we deal with the interactions between and among diverse individuals in many settings. In working with volunteers it is essential that open lines of communication exist. The effective resolution of a conflict may lead to better retention and effectiveness of volunteers. Volunteers are valuable assets to organizations and successful management of conflict situations can foster trust and create a better working relationship for all. This article addresses the issue of conflict resolution for individuals in a professional and personal context.

It must be realized that:

- Conflict is a normal part of human interaction and is ever-present in human relationships.
- Conflict resolution should *not* be an effort to suppress or eliminate conflict, but rather an attempt to work through it.

- Conflict resolution can be an effort to direct energy into constructive channels.
- Conflicts may end with a decision that defines what will happen in the future.
- Conflicts can result in joint or negotiated endings.
- Conflict can result in better relationships, clearer understanding, new goals, expanded material resources, and favorable outcomes.
- Conflict can be redirected to help everyone involved work to achieve a "win-win" resolution.

Five styles of conflict resolution will be discussed: forcing/competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating.

### *Forcing/Competing*

Those who use this style try to overpower opponents by forcing them to accept their solution to the conflict. Their own agenda and goals are highly important to them. The personal relationship is of minor importance. They seek to

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achieve results at all costs and are not overly concerned with the needs of others. Their acceptance by others is of little importance to this type of personality. They are ready to accept a win-lose resolution. Ego gratification and dominance are the rewards of the competition. If necessary these individuals will attack, overpower, overwhelm, and intimidate to avoid losing.

The appropriate use for this conflict style is when a crisis needs an immediate resolution and relationships are not critical to maintain. When the person *knows* s/he is right and the stakes are *high*, this personality type is essential. In emergency situations when there are few alternatives this conflict style is a key factor in reaching an immediate resolution to a crisis.

#### *Collaborating*

To collaborate everyone must problem-solve together. All relevant information is considered and each participant is valued as a vital part of the process. All angles of an issue are explored. The solution reached achieves the goals of all group members. This style seeks to eliminate negative tensions and competitiveness. Maintaining relationships is crucial. Everyone must be satisfied with the proposed solution.

This style is appropriate when time is not critical and when input and commitment from all sides is desired in order to reach a conclusion.

#### *Compromising*

This style is characterized by the willingness of one party to a conflict to give up a desired outcome in order to persuade the other to do the same. Relationships are not as important as agreement for the common good. When this style is used, achieving a "win-win" resolution and bargaining in order to gain it are the most common outcomes.

This technique is useful when a mutually satisfactory result without any concessions would be impossible to achieve. Compromise is commonly used when

time is limited and the parties have less invested in the relationship.

#### *Avoiding*

Withdrawing and attempting to get rid of conflict by denying that it exists are examples of avoidance. Physical and psychological avoidance are common techniques used to dodge situations in which conflict may result. Neither personal investment in the issue nor a desire to maintain the relationship are high priorities for this personality type.

This style often is used when the participants consider the issue controversial or too hot to handle. When both sides avoid conflict, and there is no real resolution, the issue is certain to arise again and may take a less benign form.

#### *Accommodating*

The maintenance of harmonious personal relationships is more important than the outcome in this interaction. Those who practice accommodation value harmony and acceptance. Smoothing over conflicts, giving in, and earnestly working to reduce tensions are strategies commonly employed. Sacrificing personal goals to preserve relationships and maintain congeniality are essential elements for this personality type.

### COMMON RESPONSES TO CONFLICT

Individuals may respond to conflict in a variety of ways.

- **Avoidance:** Acknowledging a dispute, but remaining uninvolved.
- **Acceptance:** Recognizing a conflict and accepting whatever solution emerges.
- **Denial:** Refusing to acknowledge or play a role in conflict resolution.
- **Enjoyment:** Some people enjoy agitation and benefit from conflict.
- **Flight:** Distancing oneself physically from the conflict.
- **Ignoring:** Acting as if a conflict does not exist.
- **Management:** Acknowledging the conflict and acting to control its impact.

- **Promotion:** Agitating in order to be heard.
- **Suppression:** Preventing a conflict from surfacing by the use of power.

Conflict escalates in progressive stages. It begins with a simple difference of opinion that leads to a disagreement. The disagreement becomes a problem that results in a dispute. A dispute becomes a conflict that can escalate into violence that can lead to war. Luckily most conflicts don't progress to the final stage. Each level, however, can be a difficult and challenging situation for individuals to face.

### COPING STRATEGIES

Conflict can be *positive* and *negative*. Conflict handled positively can help people understand what others are feeling and help define individual aspirations and issues. Positive conflict can result in respect for differing points of view and clear the air of past misunderstandings. On the other hand, negative conflict can interrupt normal relationships and damage self-esteem. Hostility and resentment may make rational discussion difficult and permanent dissolutions of relationships can occur. Negative conflict causes stress and results in loss of time and energy.

When dealing with conflict one must clarify its nature. If the disagreement is over facts, existing data must be validated. If the conflict is over methods, recognition of points of agreement is necessary and sometimes helpful. If goals or priorities are at the heart of the matter, clarification of what each party actually desires can aid in the resolution process. The most difficult problems arise when the conflict is over values. Identifying exact differences and commonalities is helpful in resolving conflicts over values. Stating, "I disagree with you on (specifics)..." leads to a better outcome than simply saying, "I disagree."

### COMMUNICATIONS SKILLS

Effective communication is a vital part of conflict resolution. Avoiding common

communication blockers enables individuals to maintain relationships and resolve conflicts more effectively. The blockers listed below should be recognized and avoided if resolution of the conflict is desired.

- **Accusing:** "Your management style is the reason the project failed."
- **Blaming:** "Because you forgot the deadline, we did not receive the grant."
- **Expectation of mind-reading:** "You should have known that I would be hurt by your actions."
- **Globalizing:** "You never complete a task on time and you are always late."
- **Ignoring:** "We must move on. We don't have time to consider your idea now."
- **Insulting:** "I can't believe you were so irresponsible."
- **Interrupting:** "Yes, but I feel that my ideas are more acceptable."
- **Judging:** "The project failed because you did not devote enough time."
- **Using sarcasm:** "Well, it's good to finally see you at a meeting on time."
- **Stating opinion as fact:** "The committee will never select you for a leadership role."

Conflict can be resolved more readily if the parties focus on one issue at a time and not try to settle everything at once. Individuals must stop fighting to reach a mutual resolution. The use of "I messages" that focus on what a person feels and using active listening techniques guarantee less confrontation. Avoiding complaints and sticking to the present helps. Using absolutes such as "always," "should," and "never" must be avoided. Also to be avoided is soliciting second opinions or recruiting others to be "on your side."

Regardless of the strategy selected to resolve conflict, there are some basic conflict resolution skills that are helpful.

- Talk directly to the person with whom you have a conflict. Avoid second parties.
- Choose a good time to talk. Timing is

everything.

- Plan what you want to say ahead of time. Make notes if necessary.
- Don't blame or use threats.
- Give information about your feelings.
- Listen and hear what the other person is really saying.
- Show that you are listening by acknowledging others' feelings.
- Talk through all of the issues at conflict.
- Work jointly on a mutually agreeable solution.
- Follow through and monitor the resolution process.

## CONCLUSION

To be human is to experience conflict. We differ in opinions, values, needs, habits, and desires. Diversity should be what we celebrate in the people we regard highly in our personal and professional lives. Though most of us would prefer not

to deal with conflicts, realistically we cannot avoid them if we are to maintain healthy relationships with others. Conflict can be a creative process and provide us with an opportunity to review habits, practices, and policies and take positive steps to improve them.

Trying to bring resolution to a conflict that has deteriorated is a difficult and sometime impossible task. We may elect to "agree to disagree." However we choose to resolve our daily conflicts, we must be cognizant of the fact that effective basic communication skills and an open mind are essential to the process. Treating the other party with respect is key to maintaining a healthy personal or professional relationship. Patience and cooperation encourage tolerance and understanding in others.