

Chapter 11

Conflict and Communications in Organizations

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Because educational organizations exist only to foster cooperative human endeavors and to achieve goals that cannot be achieved by individuals acting alone, their organizational ideals normatively emphasize cooperation, harmony, and collaboration. Contemporary literature on schools ordinarily stresses virtues such as empowerment, participation, and collaboration, with little mention of competition and conflict. Yet, as James MacGregor Burns ([1978](#)), who gave us transformational leadership theory, wrote, “the potential for conflict permeates the relations of humankind, and that potential is a force for health and growth as well as destruction. . . . No group can be wholly harmonious . . . for such a group

would be empty of process and structure” (p. 37). Thus, because conflict is pervasive in all human experience, it is an important aspect of organizational behavior in education.

Conflict can occur even within a single individual (so-called *intrapersonal conflict*), typified by approach-avoidance conflict, the common situation in which the person feels torn between the desire to achieve two goals that are incompatible. This tension leads to feelings of stress and—not infrequently—behavior manifestations (for example, indecisiveness) and even physiological symptoms (for example, hypertension, ulcers). Howard Gardner’s concept of *intrapersonal intelligence*, introduced in an earlier chapter, becomes important in this discussion. Conflict runs the gamut of social experience—between individuals, between groups, and between whole societies and cultures.

Conflict can occur *within* persons or social units; it is *intrapersonal* or *intragroup* (or, of course, *intranational*). Conflict can also be experienced *between* two or more people or social units: so-called *interpersonal*, *intergroup*, or *international* conflict. In this chapter, we are not attempting to deal with the broad, general phenomenon of conflict; we will confine the discussion to conflict in organizational life—*organizational conflict* (that is, *intraorganizational conflict*), which most

commonly involves interpersonal conflict and intergroup conflict. (See the discussion in a previous chapter on Gardner's concept of [*interpersonal intelligence*](#).)

The Nature of Conflict in Organizations

In bureaucratic theory, the existence of conflict is viewed as evidence of breakdown in the organization: failure on the part of management to plan adequately or to exercise sufficient control. In human relations theory, conflict is seen as evidence of failure to develop appropriate norms in the group. Traditional administrative theory has therefore been strongly biased in favor of the ideal of a smooth-running organization characterized by harmony, unity, coordination, efficiency, and order. Human relations adherents might seek to achieve this through happy, congenial work groups, whereas classical adherents would seek to achieve it through control and strong organizational structure. Both, however, tend to agree that

conflict is disruptive: something to be avoided. One of the more dramatic developments in the literature on organizations has been a re-examination of these positions, resulting in some more useful views.

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In the vast body of scientific literature, no consensus can be found on a specific definition of conflict. It is generally agreed upon, however, that two prerequisites are essential to any conflict: (1) divergent (or apparently divergent) views and (2) incompatibility of those views (Thomas, [1976](#)).

Thus, Morton Deutsch ([1973](#)) said simply that “a conflict exists whenever incompatible activities occur.” But this incompatibility produces a dilemma—conflict becomes “the pursuit of incompatible, or at least seemingly incompatible, goals, such that gains to one side come out at the expense of the other” (p. 10). When incompatibility results in one side coming out ahead, we are confronted with the classic, zero-sum, win-lose situation that is potentially so dysfunctional to organizational life; everyone strives to avoid losing and losers seek to become winners. The focus of contemporary application of behavioral science to organizations is precisely as follows: to manage conflict in the organization so that hostility can be either avoided or minimized. This process is *not* the management of

hostility; it is the management of conflict that reduces or eliminates the hostility emanating from it.

Conflict Different from Attacks

A distinct difference exists between organizational conflict and its attendant [hostility](#), on the one hand, and destructive attacks, on the other; to treat them as being alike can be a serious mistake. Kenneth Boulding ([1962](#)) suggested that we distinguish between malevolent hostility and nonmalevolent hostility. Malevolent hostility is aimed at hurting or worsening the position of another individual or group, with scant regard for anything else, including the consequences for the attacker. Nonmalevolent hostility, in contrast, may well worsen the position of others but is acted out for the purpose of improving the position of the attacker. Malevolent hostility is often characterized by the use of issues as the basis for attack, which are, in reality, not important to the attacker except as a vehicle for damaging the opposition.

Malevolent hostility can, in turn, give rise to “nefarious attacks” (Wynn, [1972](#), p. 7). These are characterized by the following:

1. The focus on persons rather than on issues
2. The use of hateful language
3. The use of dogmatic statements rather than questions
4. The maintenance of fixed views regardless of new information or argument
5. The use of emotional terms.

The key difference between such attacks (whether malevolent, nefarious, or otherwise) and legitimate expressions of conflict lies in the motivation behind them, which is often not easily discernible. Although considerable (and often vigorous) conflict may erupt over issues such as improving school performance, ways of desegregating a school system, or how to group children for instruction, the parties to the conflict may well be motivated by essentially constructive goals. The key is whether the parties involved want to work with the system or are motivated by a wish to destroy it.

320 Warren Bennis ([2010](#)) described, for example, how—in a period of student disruption at the State University of New York at Buffalo—he labored hard and long to deal with a student takeover of the campus, using his not inconsiderable skills as a

third-party facilitator. But it was all to no avail. Looking back, Bennis came to realize that he really had not been in a two-party conflict management situation at all. The students—to the extent that they were organized—were committed to a set of political goals that had little to do with the educational goals that the university administrators embraced. In this case, the conflict was largely a device being used to achieve carefully masked goals. The student confrontations and rhetoric were often, in fact, malevolent with little intention of coming to agreement. Any public education administrator needs to be sensitive to this problem and to be aware of the significant difference between attacks for the sake of destruction and vigorous expression of essentially constructive—though sharply divergent and perhaps unwelcome—views.

Contemporary Views of Conflict

Conflict in organizations is now seen as inevitable, endemic, and often legitimate because the individuals and groups within the human social system are interdependent and constantly engaged in the dynamic processes of defining and redefining

the nature and extent of their interdependence. Important to the dynamics of this social process is the fact that the environment in which it occurs is itself constantly changing. Thus, as Chester Barnard ([1938](#)) pointed out, “inherent in the conception of free will in a changing environment” (p. 36) are social patterns characterized by negotiating, stress, and conflict.

Conflict occurs in any well-led organization because, as we saw in the chapter on organizational change, leaders marshal and organize resources sometimes *in conflict with others*. By definition, leaders marshal resources (people, money, time, facilities, materials) to achieve new goals. Given the finite resources available in an educational organization, competing ideas of what to do with those resources will invariably arise: how to use the time, how to involve people, where to spend the money, how to schedule facilities, and so on. Thus, when leadership is present, people in the organization must experience conflict as a normal part of organizational life. The central issue, then, is neither whether organizational conflict is present nor the degree to which it is present. The central issue is how well conflict is managed in the organization.

Effects of Organizational Conflict

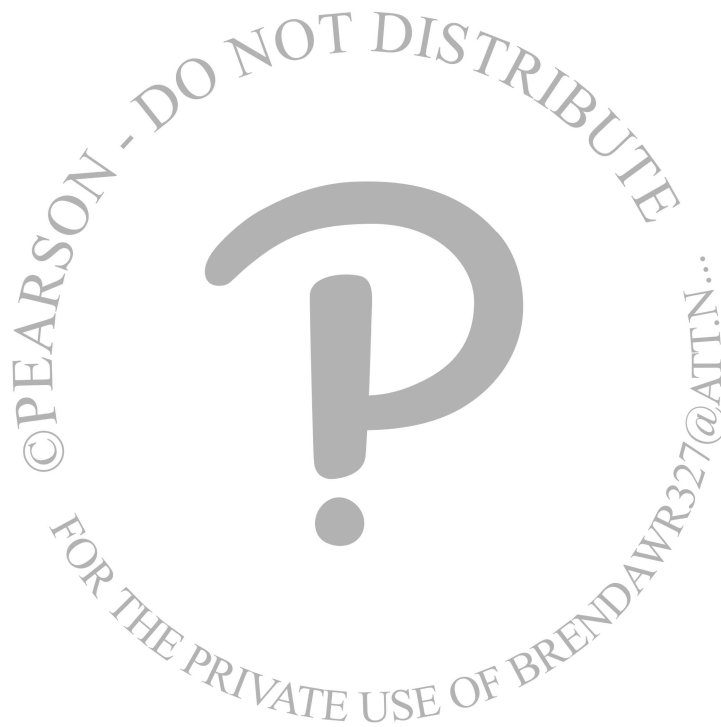
This is an important issue because frequent and powerful hostility arising from conflict can have a devastating impact on the behavior of people in organizations. Psychological withdrawal from the hostility—such as alienation, apathy, and indifference—is a common symptom that keenly affects the functioning of the organization. Physical withdrawal—such as absence, tardiness, and turnover—is a widely occurring response to conflict in schools. Physical withdrawal is often written off as laziness on the part of teachers who have been spoiled by soft administrative practices. Outright hostile or aggressive behaviors—including job actions, property damage, and minor theft of property—are teacher responses to conflict situations that appear to be too difficult to handle or totally frustrating.

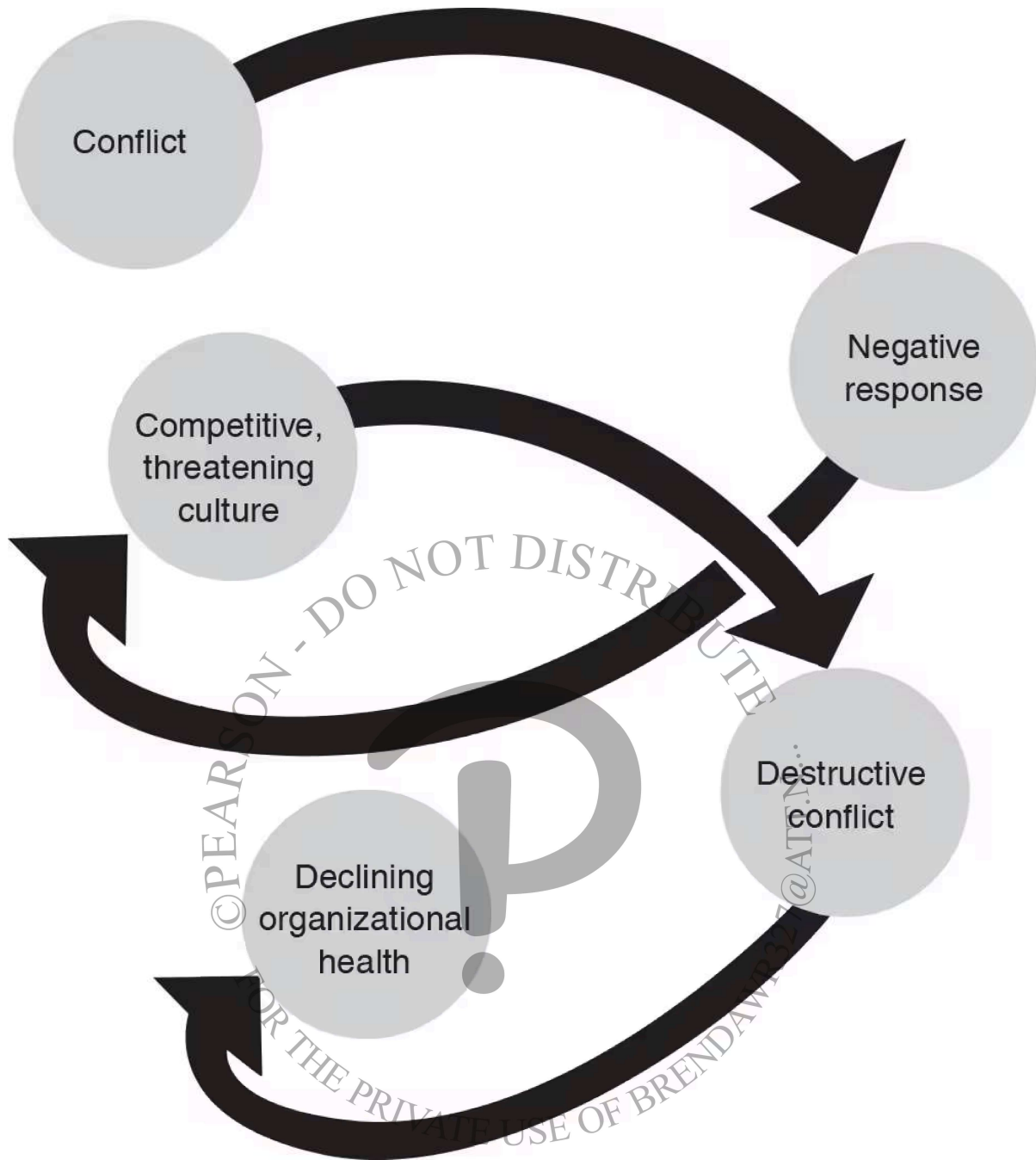
Indeed, the behavioral consequences of conflict in educational organizations can be, to put it mildly, undesirable. Ineffective management of conflict (for example, a hard-nosed policy of punishment for offenses, get-tough practices in the name of administering the negotiated contract, emphasizing the adversarial relationship between teachers and administrators)

can—and frequently does—create a climate that exacerbates the situation and is likely to develop a downward spiral of mounting frustration, deteriorating organizational climate, and increasing destructiveness, as shown in **Figure 11.1**.

Figure 11.1

An ineffective conflict-response-climate syndrome leads to a lower state of organizational health.





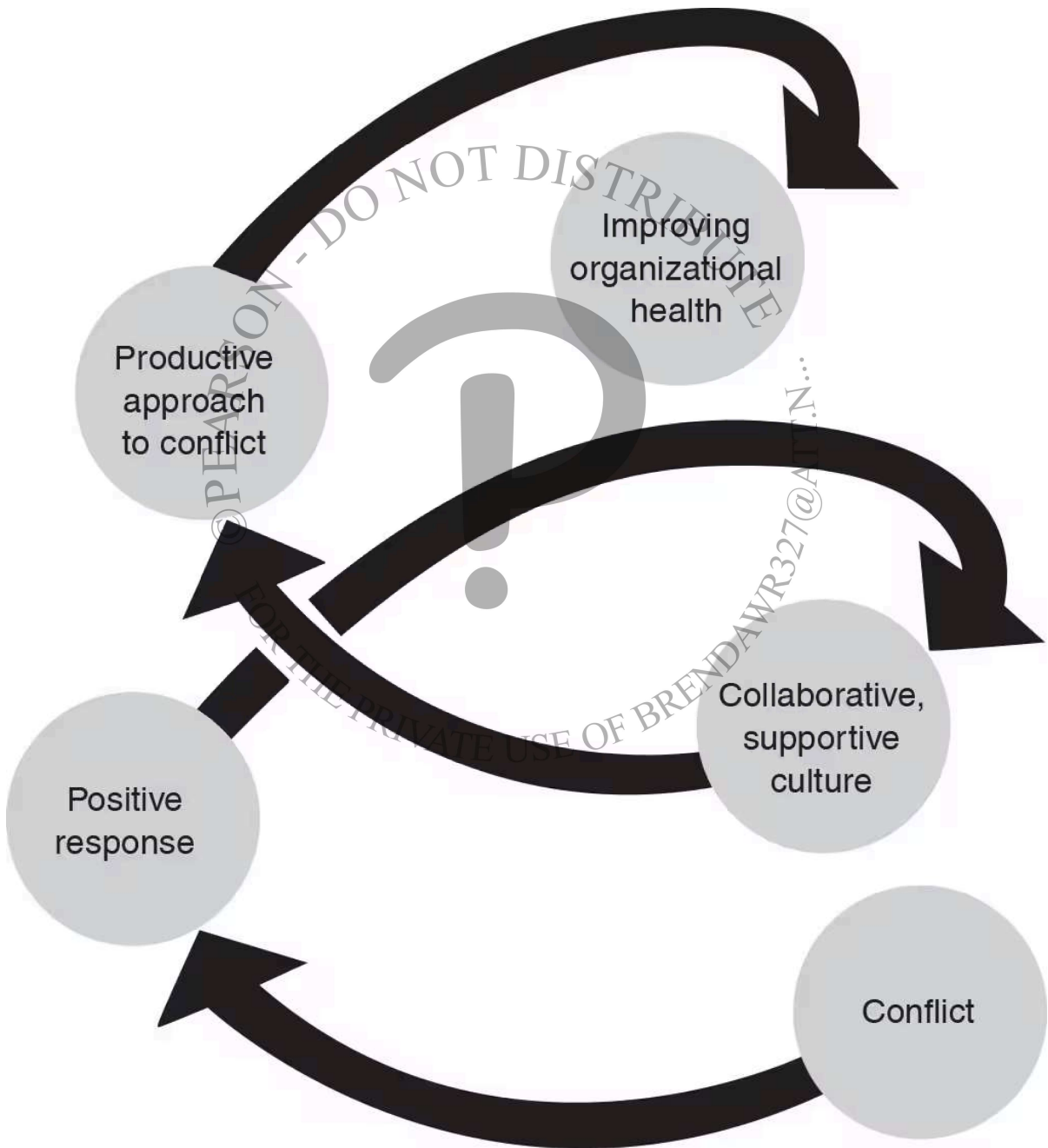
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Obviously, the health of an organization caught in this syndrome tends to decline. Effective management of conflict, however, can lead to outcomes that are productive and enhance the health of the organization over time, as shown in **Figure 11.2**. The point to be emphasized is that conflict in itself is neither good nor bad; it is (in value terms) neutral. Its impact

on the organization and the behavior of people largely depends on the way conflict is treated.

Figure 11.2

An effective conflict-response-climate syndrome leads to an improved state of organizational health.



The Criterion: Organizational Performance

To speak of organizational conflict as good or bad, or as functional or dysfunctional, requires one to specify the criteria used in judging. Some people—many with a humanistic bias—simply find conflict repugnant and seek to abolish it wherever it may be found. Others are concerned about the internal stress that conflict often imposes on individuals. These problems, in themselves, are not of central concern in *organizational* terms. After all, some people relish conflict, find it zestful, and seek it out. The issue, then, is the impact of conflict on the performance capability of the organization as a system.

Again, the problems of measuring the productivity of educational organizations and the discussion of the relevance of the school's system or school's internal conditions (that is, organizational culture, interaction-influence system) come to the fore. The functional or dysfunctional consequences of conflict for educational organizations are understood best in terms of organizational health, adaptability, and stability.

Modern motivation theory makes it clear that challenge, significance, and the need to solve problems are important attributes of work that people find interesting, enjoyable, and motivating. Also, as has been seen, concepts of participative leadership rest on the conviction that many people in the organization have good ideas and high-quality information to contribute to making better decisions in the organization. In this view, Kenneth Thomas ([1976](#)) observed that

[t]he confrontation of divergent views often produces ideas of superior quality. Divergent views are apt to be based upon different evidence, different considerations, different insights, different frames of reference.

Disagreements may thus confront an individual with factors which he had previously ignored, and help

him to arrive at a more comprehensive view which synthesizes elements of his own and others' positions. (p. 891)

Finally, there is growing reason to believe (based on both research and expert opinion) that conflict causes people to seek effective ways of dealing with it, resulting in improved organizational functioning (for example, cohesiveness, clarified relationships, clearer problem-solving procedures). Speaking of society in general, Deutsch ([1973](#)) observed that

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conflict within a group frequently helps to revitalize existent norms; or it contributes to the emergence of new norms. In this sense, social conflict is a mechanism for adjustment of norms adequate to new conditions. A flexible

society benefits from conflict because such behavior, by helping to create and modify norms, assures its continuance under changed conditions. (p. 9)

He went on to caution that rigid systems that suppress conflict smother a useful warning signal, thereby maximizing the danger of catastrophic breakdown.

We all have witnessed repeatedly the wisdom of these observations in national and international events of great and small magnitude. Educators in the United States also have seen it closer to home, where fearful explosions of pent-up hostility have, not infrequently, followed long periods of frustration brought on by organizations that thought they had either crushed or nimbly avoided impending conflict.

Although few who really understand conflict would advocate its deliberate use in organizational life, fewer still would advocate seeking its elimination or avoidance. Rather, by applying concepts of conflict management, organizations can minimize

the destructive potential of conflict, on the one hand, and make conflict as productive, creative, and useful as possible, on the other.

