

# The Dynamics of Organizational Conflict

## Hostility

Many people say that they do not like conflict, avoid it whenever they can, and may even fear it. This point is important to recognize because it leads to one of the least productive and most common approaches to conflict management: denial and avoidance. Therefore, it is not splitting hairs to point out that the aftermath to an episode of conflict is ordinarily more troubling than the conflict itself. Badly managed organizational conflict can generate hostility among the parties, and this factor can lead to hate, retribution, and antagonism.

A key goal of any approach to conflict management is to eliminate or reduce—to manage—the hostility arising from the conflict. But the time to intervene is before conflict arises, rather than afterward. It is important for members of the organization

to learn to talk openly about conflict and to discuss what conflict is and the strategies and tactics that may be used to encourage it (yes, encourage it) in ways that will be productive for everyone.

Although numerous writers have compiled a long list of the causes of organizational conflict, Louis Pondy's classifications are considered by most to have considerable merit in today's schools. He classified three basic types of *latent* conflict:

1. When the organization's resources are insufficient to meet the requirements of the subunits to do their work, *competition for scarce resources* arises (for example, budget allocations, assigned teaching positions, reduced space or facilities).
2. When one party seeks to control the activities "belonging" to another unit (and the second unit seeks to fend off such "interference"), the issue is *autonomy* (for example, protecting one's "turf").

3. When two parties in the organization must work together but cannot agree on how to do so, the source of conflict is *goal divergence* (for example, the school principal and the director of special education have differing views about how mainstreaming issues are to be settled).  
(Pondy, [1967](#))

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## A Contingency View

These latent sources of conflict are unlikely to disappear from organizational life. Therefore, it is important to develop a culture that supports productive approaches to conflict management. Because conflict has a number of causes—even when classified or grouped, as above—it is obvious that there is no one best way of managing conflict. As John Thomas and Warren Bennis ([1972](#)) put it:

An effective paradigm incorporates what might be termed a “situational” or “contingency” framework, a

point of view reflected in much of the current theoretical and empirical work in organizational theory. There is a primary emphasis upon diagnosis and the assumption that it is self-defeating to adopt a “universally” applicable set of principles and guidelines for effecting change or managing conflict. (p. 20)

As a basis for the necessary organizational diagnosis, two concepts concerning conflict are often used: One seeks to understand the internal dynamics of the events that occur in the process of conflict; the other seeks to analyze the external influences that tend to structure the conflict.

## A Process View of Conflict

Conflict between two parties appears to unfold in a relatively orderly sequence of events, and, unless something intervenes, the sequence tends to be repeated in episodes. Each episode is highly dynamic, with each party's behavior serving as a stimulus to evoke a response from the other. Each new episode is shaped in part by previous episodes.

One model of such a process is suggested by Kenneth Thomas; in this model, an episode is triggered by the *frustration* of one party in reaction to the act of another (for example, denial of a request, diminishment of status, disagreement, or an insult). This friction causes the participants to *conceptualize* the nature of the conflict—often a highly subjective process that suggests ways of defining and dealing with perceived issues in the conflict, which is followed by *behavior* intended to deal with the conflict. As Kenneth Thomas explained, understanding the bases for this behavior is a complex matter, but key elements surely include a mix of (a) a participant's desire to satisfy the other's concern (cooperative-uncooperative) and (b) the participant's desire to satisfy personal concern (assertive-unassertive). *Interaction* of the parties follows, of course; this is a highly dynamic phase of the process. It can involve escalation or de-escalation of the conflict, depending on factors such as the trust level that is established, biases and self-fulfilling

prophecies that get in the way, the level of competition between the participants, and the openness and sensitivity each has to the other. The *outcome* of all this—the last stage in an episode of conflict—is not merely some agreement on substantive issues but also includes residual emotions (for example, frustration, hostility, trust—either increased or decreased). These outcomes have potentially long-term effects on the aftermath of a conflict episode, particularly as they set the stage for ensuing episodes.

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In commenting on the aftermath as part of a sequence of episodes, Louis Pondy ([1967](#)) pointed out that

if the conflict is genuinely resolved to the satisfaction of all participants, the basis for a more cooperative relationship may be laid; or the participants, in their drive for a more ordered relationship, may focus on latent conflicts not previously perceived and dealt

with. On the other hand, if conflict is merely suppressed but not resolved, the latent conditions of conflict may be aggravated and explode in more serious form. . . . This legacy of a conflict episode is . . . called “conflict aftermath.” (p. 320)

## A Structural View of Conflict

Although a process approach to conflict describes it as a *sequence of events*, a structural view tends to describe conflict in terms of the *conditions that influence behavior*. For example, every organization has rules and procedures (written and unwritten, formal and informal) that regulate behavior (for instance, who talks with whom about what). Rules and procedures often serve to avoid or manage conflict by clarifying

issues such as how and when to proceed, and who has what responsibility. Of course, they can also cause or exacerbate conflict by becoming dysfunctional, such as when they lead to rigid, repetitious behavior that does not readily allow for exceptions (the typical bureaucratic “hardening of the categories”).

Not infrequently, rules and procedures so complicate the processes of working out a relatively simple conflict through direct negotiation that they, in fact, create conflict. For example, in one school district, an elementary school principal discovered that an order for a certain kind of paper had been cut sharply by an administrative assistant in the office of the assistant superintendent for business. When the principal contacted the administrative assistant to straighten out the matter, she was reminded that her complaint should be routed through the assistant superintendent for elementary education, who could take it up with the assistant superintendent of business, and so on. Needless to say, considerable conflict ensued, much time was lost, and the needed paper finally arrived at the school—in time for the *following* year. The point is that simple rearrangements in the way that even minor decisions are made and differences are negotiated can influence the course of conflict in organizations.

Another structural factor lies in the kinds of people found in the organization, with particular reference to their personality predispositions, such as their attitudes toward authority and the extent and flexibility of their responses to others. In selecting new personnel, for example, many school districts and schools are attracted to candidates who seem to fit in over candidates who might add diversity to the staff.

Another structural factor influencing the incidence and nature of conflict in an organization is the social norms of the organization: the social pressures, for example, to “stand up and fight” or “not rock the boat.” The creation of organizational cultures that smooth over friction and frown on open challenge and questioning can make it very difficult to identify and confront conflict at all. Similarly, when secretiveness and restricted communication represent the organizational norm, it is difficult to know if a latent conflict exists, let alone to plan ways of dealing with it. Many administrators of educational organizations instinctively understand this fact and make it a rule to put as little communication in writing as possible, to assemble people for meetings as infrequently as possible, and—when meetings *must* be held—to be sure to control the proceedings tightly to minimize the risk of opening up issues that might cause trouble.

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Todd Whitaker ([2002](#)), who wrote a very popular book to assist principals in dealing with individuals who create conflict, suggested using frequent communications and meetings to minimize hostile, harmful conflict. He suggested principals use opportunities to bring conflict to the forefront; it will only fester if ignored. In meetings and written communications, principals can positively reinforce those individuals who are working to support the organization's goals, thereby sending a message to those less positive individuals about behavioral expectations.

Thus, the structural factors that shape conflict in organizations are strongly influenced by structural factors in the organization itself (Likert & Likert, [1976](#)). Likert and Likert advocated developing a more responsive interaction-influence system through System 4 leadership, developing a supportive climate, de-emphasizing hierarchical status, and using consensus for productive (win-win) problem solving.

## An Open-Systems View of Conflict

Thus far, we have been discussing organizational conflict entirely in terms of the internal functioning of educational organizations, and this topic will continue to be the focus of the chapter as a whole. It is vital, however, not to lose sight of the fact that these organizations are open systems: They are interactive with their environments, and much that goes on within them reflects changes in the external environment.

The University Council on Education Administration (UCEA) conducted a series of three “Voices from the Field” projects between 1999 and 2012. Using the third study (Acker-Hocevar et al., [2012](#)) that included 81 superintendents and 85 principals across the United States and representative of both genders as well as various ethnic/racial backgrounds, Alsbury and Whitaker ([2012](#)) analyzed superintendents’ and principals’ responses to outside forces and stress levels. They reported as follows:

**Although superintendents agreed with the intent of NCLB, they were dissatisfied and frustrated with the implementation of the law.**

Components of the law such as AYP, particularly related to special education, and highly qualified teachers posed difficulties for superintendents. Lack of funding to implement NCLB was another stressor for superintendents. (p. 173)

Alsbury and Whitaker also reported superintendents felt a great deal of pressure dealing with many community groups with divergent interests, as well as “power issues with members of their boards of education. Terminating employees seemed to cause a lot of angst for small-district superintendents in terms of their relationships with boards and communities” (p. 174).

Another source of conflict for superintendents was dealing with the “teachers’ unions and in the context of making decisions in the best interests of students” (p. 175).

Like superintendents, principals reported pressures in dealing with the implementation of No Child Left Behind (NCLB).

Prominent complaints were dealing with the issue of recruiting

and maintaining highly qualified teachers, and meeting [Adequate Yearly Progress \(AYP\)](#) requirements for subgroups. In addition, and similar to superintendents, principals reported problems with parents and other stakeholders:

Principals often struggled with their desire to solicit input and the simultaneous political pressures of community members or board members wanting decisions to go their way. Coupled with pressures from boards and community members was working with the teachers' unions within the decision-making process. (Alsbury & Whitaker, [2012](#), p. 179)

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Another good case in point is P.L. 94-142 (currently known as Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA]), which was

passed by Congress and signed into law on November 29, 1975. It is a classic example of power-coercive change strategy and probably set the stage for more widespread conflict in U.S. public schooling—at all levels—than anything since the *Brown* school desegregation decision about two decades earlier. At the highest levels, it raised conflicting constitutional issues: the interpretation of the Tenth Amendment that education is a state responsibility and a matter of local control versus the view that P.L. 94-142 is an exercise of federal responsibility to ensure full civil rights and equal opportunity for the unserved (and inadequately served) population of children with disabilities.

However, the law also raised conflicts all along the line, from Washington, DC, to the most remote school classroom in the nation. For example, it sought to redefine the prerogatives of teachers to control instruction and related decision making by mandating the inclusion of parents in a participatory role in planning individualized instruction and in a formalized appeal process. The parent—formerly an outsider confined to an advisory role—suddenly became one of the insiders with new authority in relation to the teacher.

The ability of schools to deal productively with this conflict thrust on them from the larger environment was unclear even as late as 1990 because external initiatives to mandate

increasing control of the classroom decisions of teachers were still increasing in number and scope. However, it is a clear and unambiguous illustration of how conflict—very much involving the internal functioning of schools and school systems—can be imposed on them by rapid change in the external system.

Gerald Griffin and David Rostetter ([1978](#)) speculated about whether Randall Collins's (Collins, [1975](#)) five hypotheses on coercive efforts to deal with coercion and conflict might apply. As Griffin and Rosetter pointed out:

1. Coercion leads to strong efforts to avoid being coerced.
2. If resources for fighting back are available, the greater the coercion applied the more counter-aggression is called forth.
3. If resources are not available but opportunities to escape are, the greater the tendency to leave the situation.
4. If resources for fighting back and opportunities to escape are not available, or if there are other strong incentives for staying in the situation (material rewards or potential power), the greater coercion that is applied, the greater the tendency to comply with exactly those demands that are necessary to avoid being coerced.

5. If resources for fighting back and opportunities for escape are not available, the . . . tendency to dull compliance and passive resistance increases. (p. 4)

In this view, coercion leads to a conflict-hostility-resistance syndrome *within* the organization, nothing like the synergistic, creative, problem-solving culture that characterizes effective organizations. Only time will tell what effect federal initiatives, based on traditional concepts of schools as organizations, will ultimately have.

