

Approaches to Organizational Conflict

When conflict arises, the almost instinctive response of the parties involved is to adopt a strategy—backed by determination—to *win*. To most people, winning means, ipso facto, that the other party will *lose*.

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The focal point of conflict management is the win-lose orientation and how to deal with it. It is important, first, to understand the dynamics and consequences of win-lose approaches to conflict and, second, to see what alternatives are available.

The Win-Lose Orientation to Conflict

The dynamics of win-lose conflict and their consequences for organizational behavior are well known. In the 1950s and 1960s, students of group dynamics conducted extensive research on the phenomena of group conflict—including both experimental work and field observation studies (see the discussion of group dynamics and human relations in [Chapter 3](#)) (Deutsch, [1949](#); Sherif & Sherif, [1953](#); Sherif et al., [1961](#)).

Early in the study of organizational conflict, and still current thinking, Blake et al. ([1964](#)) observed that “a win-lose orientation to conflict is characterized by one basic element. The contesting parties see their interests to be mutually exclusive. No compromise is possible. One must fail at the price of the other’s success” (p. 18). The parties to the conflict come to believe that the issues can be settled in one of three ways: (a) a power struggle, (b) intervention by a third party who possesses some sort of power greater than either of them (and this can include public opinion or moral suasion), or (c) fate. This approach has two consequences, according to Likert and Likert ([1976](#)). Conflict *between parties* causes deep negative feelings and typically results in hostility and failure to arrive at acceptable solutions for both parties. In addition, conflict *within groups* typically results in expectations that members will toe the party line and diversity of opinion is not acceptable. Leaders

close ranks around their most ardent supporters, which sets the stage for in-group dissension.

Experimental studies of conflict made it clear that the perception of individuals and groups is very much involved in conflict—often becoming distorted as the episode unfolds (Blake et al., [1964](#); Deutsch, [1973](#); Sherif & Sherif, [1953](#)). And, of course, “perception is the key to behavior. The way people see things determines the way they will act. If their perceptions are distorted, the distortions are reflected in their behavior” (Likert & Likert, [1976](#), p. 61). One may believe one is communicating a certain message, but the receiver may be interpreting the message in a different way. Thus, judgment is adversely affected by the conflict experience: One tends to become blindly loyal, to become hostile to members of the other group, and to denigrate not only their ideas but also their worth as people. Leaders of the opposition—formerly seen as mature, able people—are now seen as irresponsible and incapable. Indeed, even cognition is affected: In studying proposed solutions to the conflict, it becomes difficult or impossible to see merit in proposals put forth by the other side, even though they may be in substantial agreement with one’s own ideas. Thus, agreement becomes elusive. *Any* sign of questioning about the position of one’s group or any approval of proposals put forth from the other side is viewed by associates

as backing down. Winning becomes everything. The ability to identify alternatives, to be objective, and to suspend judgment while seeking to understand are all badly distorted as one increasingly shares the gung-ho drive of the group for victory.

In terms of the process model of conflict (described earlier), win-lose is a way of conceptualizing the conflict and gives rise to predictable patterns of behavior in the interaction between parties to the conflict as the episode unfolds. But the consequences, it should be clear, are not limited to the shape and character of the conflict itself. Each of the groups involved in the conflict is powerfully affected in the aftermath. Usually, hostility between the winning group and the losing group is intensified, and subsequent episodes may be expected.

Commonly, the losing group rejects its leaders; very likely it will, in time, begin reappraising what went wrong and start preparing to do better next time. Powerful emotional reactions (resentment—even hatred—and anxiety) are likely to continue to distort the group's functioning, reducing the likelihood that it will develop a climate supportive of self-renewal and creative problem solving. Thus, win-lose solutions to conflict tend to build long-term dysfunctional behaviors that result in a downward spiral of organizational climate, performance, and overall organizational health. A central concern of conflict

management, then, is to seek more effective ways of conceptualizing conflict as a basis for more effective behavior.

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A Contingency Approach to Conflict

Contingency approaches to management are predicated on the concept that diagnosis of the situation is necessary as a basis for action. In dealing with conflict, the contingency view holds that there is no one best way of managing it under all conditions but that optimal ways of managing conflict are available under certain conditions. An important aspect of conflict management, then, is to consider (a) alternative ways of managing conflict and (b) the kinds of situations in which each of these various alternatives might be expected to show the most effectiveness, not only in dealing with the critical issues but also in doing so in a way that strengthens the organization.

Diagnosing Conflict

In the first place, it is helpful to ascertain whether conflict *does* exist between the parties or whether a conflict only *appears* (to the parties) to exist. The criterion is whether the two parties seek goals that are actually incompatible.

Frequently, what appears to be a brewing conflict between two parties is, in fact, a misunderstanding. When the problem is recognized as one of distorted perception, as discussed earlier, it is probable that the misunderstanding can be dealt with through explicit goal setting and improved communication. This process often requires training individuals and groups in skills such as group goal setting and prioritizing, as well as in communication skills (for example, active listening, seeking feedback to check the receiver's perceptions, using multiple channels).

If a conflict *does* exist (that is, the parties do have goals that are mutually incompatible), then it is necessary to select a method of dealing with it as productively as possible from among the many options available. The general principle is that a win-lose approach tends to be the least productive, while a win-win approach—in which both parties win something (though not necessarily equally)—tends to be the most productive.

Collaboration is a process in which the parties work together to define their problems and then engage in mutual problem solving. As a mode of dealing with conflict, this process requires, first, that the parties involved must want to try to use it (and will give time and effort to participating). The process also requires that the people involved possess (a) the necessary skills for communicating and working in groups, effectively coupled with (b) attitudes that support a climate of openness, trust, and frankness in which to identify and work through problems.

In situations in which the *will* to do this exists but the skills are not well developed, a facilitator can be brought in to help the groups learn the necessary skills and engage in the collaborative processes (the facilitator does not get involved in the substance of decisions, merely the processes for making them). This is the highest level of win-win conflict management because it leaves the groups with new skills and new understandings that they can use in dealing with future problems. It is, of course, a form of organization development (organizational self-renewal). The best part of collaborative approaches to problem solving is the healthy sense of ownership or commitment to the solution arrived at that is

unmatched by other approaches. In Likert and Likert's terms, it is System 4 management.

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Bargaining, compromise, and other forms of splitting the difference have some elements in common with collaborative problem solving: (a) The parties must be willing to engage in the process (though sometimes they are legally required to do so); (b) some move is made toward collaboration (though usually this is restricted to the negotiators); and (c) the process is basically conciliatory and not in flagrant conflict with the organization's well-being. If the bargaining goes to mediation or arbitration, the outside third party plays a role quite different from that of the group-process facilitator in a collaborative process: The outside third party in mediation or arbitration *does* have the power to make judgments and impose decisions on the parties in conflict. The goal of bargaining is to develop a long-term relationship between the parties and provide them with a mechanism for dealing with future problems. But bargaining is not a collaborative approach; it recognizes that the two parties are essentially adversaries and may use information as a form of power for strategic purposes.

Neither party wins in the typical bargaining/compromise situation, but then neither party loses. Although the term *bargaining* is readily associated with labor-management

relations, negotiation processes are, in fact, widely employed within organizational settings to resolve conflicts. For example, when two administrators confer to work out some problems between their divisions, it is not uncommon for them to use negotiating and compromise techniques systematically. If the negotiations do bog down, the administrators may take the problem to their immediate superordinate for mediation (a common feature of the so-called bureaucratic mode of conflict management).

Avoidance (withdrawal, peaceful coexistence, indifference) is often employed when dealing with conflict. Avoidance is useful when (a) it is not likely that the latent conflict really can be resolved (“live with it”) or (b) the issues are not important enough to the parties that they are willing to devote the time and resources to work them out. As Blake et al. (1964) pointed out, avoidance can take the form of a ceasefire, wherein two groups engaged in a long-term struggle decide to keep in contact, still entrenched in their positions, but not to get locked into combat with each other. An interesting outcome of various avoidance responses to latent conflict is that, although conflict is not inevitable, agreement is impossible. Thus, a hostile aftermath is avoided, but the underlying problems are not dealt with; the latent conflict—with all its hazardous potential—remains, ready to become manifest at any time.

Power struggle is, of course, the effort by each party to win, regardless of the consequences for the other party. Although conflict, in itself, may be seen as having some potential benefit for organizations (or, at least, as being nondestructive), this mode of dealing with it is viewed almost universally as being destructive. It is the classic win-lose situation.

Dealing with Conflict

As Heifetz and Linsky ([2002](#)) pointed out:

When you tackle a tough issue in any group, rest assured there will be conflict, either palpable or latent . . . most people have a natural aversion to conflict . . . but your default mindset . . . is probably to limit conflict as much as possible. Indeed, many organizations

are downright allergic to conflict, seeing it primarily as a source of danger, which it certainly can be. Conflicts can generate casualties.

. . . Thus, the challenge of leadership when trying to generate adaptive change is to work with differences, passions, and conflicts in a way that diminishes their destructive potential and constructively harnesses their energy. (pp. 101–102)

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An important aspect of diagnosis for the conflict manager is to ascertain the way each party to the conflict has conceptualized the situation. In his classic work on conflict management, Kenneth Thomas ([1976](#)) contended that it is common, in a conflict situation, to emphasize the extent to which a party is willing to cooperate with another party but to overlook a second

critical factor: the party's desire to satisfy his or her own concerns. Thus, in his view, two critical behavioral dimensions shape the way conflict is conceptualized:

1. **Cooperativeness:** the extent to which one wishes to satisfy the concerns of the other
2. **Assertiveness:** the extent to which one wishes to satisfy one's own concerns

Thus, in diagnosing conflict as conceptualized by the parties involved, the issue becomes more than merely a matter of cooperating or acting professionally: Cooperation can be viewed as literally a sacrifice of one's own needs.

From this analysis, Thomas identified five principal perspectives that may be used in conceptualizing conflict and behaviors commonly associated with those perspectives:

1. *Competitive* behavior is the search to satisfy one's own concerns at the expense of others, if need be. As shown in **Table 11.1**, it is a high assertive–high uncooperative orientation. The effect is domination of the situation (as, for example, in hard-nosed contract negotiations in which nothing is yielded and every advantage is exploited). It is the classic win-lose view of conflict.

Table 11.1

Levels of Cooperativeness and Assertiveness for Five Orientations of Dealing with Conflict

Orientation	Dimensions of Conflict (Levels)	
	Cooperativeness	Assertiveness
Competitive (Domination)	Low	High
Avoidant (Neglect)	Low	Low
Accommodation (Appeasement)	High	Low
Sharing (Compromise)	Medium	Medium
Collaborative (Integration)	High	High

2. *Avoidant* (unassertive-uncooperative) behavior is usually expressed by apathy, withdrawal, and indifference. This position does *not* mean that conflict is absent but that it has been conceptualized as something not to deal with. Hence, the latent conflict remains and may be viewed differently at another time.
3. *Accommodation* (high cooperativeness—low assertiveness) is typified by appeasement: One attends to the other's concerns while neglecting one's own. This orientation may be associated with a desire to maintain a working relationship even at some sacrifice of one's interests.
4. *Sharing* orientation (moderate assertiveness—moderate cooperation) often leads to compromise (trade-offs, splitting the difference, horse trading).
5. *Collaborative* orientation to conflict (high assertiveness—high cooperativeness) leads to efforts to satisfy fully the concerns of both parties through mutual problem solving. The solution to the conflict is a genuine integration of the desires of both sides. The concept is win-win.

This approach to the analysis of conflict helps us to assess the kinds of strategies (for example, bargaining, power, or

collaboration) that might be most useful in managing conflict. The goal, of course, is to manage the conflict so that it will be as productive as possible for the organization while minimizing destructive consequences. It is important, therefore, to consider the potential long-run consequences resulting from the aftermath of conflict.

For example, avoidance or appeasement can be appealing responses because—in the short run—they are likely to head off the difficulties of seeking genuine solutions. They have the added advantage of requiring the least in terms of organizational energy, time, and resources. But they do not solve the problem that triggered the conflict, nor do they develop the organization's capacity to deal productively with conflict.

Bargaining (compromising) does help to develop the internal capacity of the organization to deal with conflict. But bargaining is not designed to produce optimal solutions: In the process of horse trading, neither side emerges completely satisfied, and quite likely the more skilled, hard-nosed negotiator will walk away with more than the opponent does. Bargaining is essentially an adversarial—if not downright underhanded—procedure using “dirty tricks” and wily ploys to gain advantage.

These tactics often engender resentment and mistrust, both dysfunctional attitudes in organizational life.

Competitive win-lose power plays and collaborative problem solving require the most energy, time, and resources. The essentially different consequences of each mode have already been described. Because the aftermath and long-term consequences of win-lose power struggles are well known to be dysfunctional and those of collaboration are known to be functional, few who are concerned about enhancing the organization's performance would fail to choose collaboration—whenever practical—as the most desirable conceptualization of conflict and competition as the least desirable.

Dealing with Difficult Individuals

Every organization is likely to have some individuals who are difficult. Todd Whitaker's book ([2002](#)), *Dealing with Difficult Teachers*, provides real-world advice for handling problems with individual teachers who may be burned out, ineffective, or just plain difficult and uncooperative. Too often the principal avoids dealing with these individuals because of the work and stress

involved in doing so. But to ignore the problem is to avoid performing the principal's most important role—providing a positive learning environment for every child. Teachers who are rude, negative, or hostile help create a negative organizational climate, and they potentially do untold harm to children. It is the principal's responsibility to either change the behavior of these individuals from negative to positive (or at least neutral) or remove them from the school. Removing them is one of the most difficult and stressful roles of the principal's job; careful documentation of all violations of district and school policy and procedures makes removal a bit easier. Prior to any attempts to remove individuals, with the exception of those culpable of willful or dangerous neglect of duty, all avenues should be considered. Whitaker offers some helpful suggestions in dealing with difficult people: ●

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1. Look for opportunities to reinforce positive behaviors, though Whitaker humorously commented that “sometimes you have to squint” (p. 31) because positive behaviors may be seldom exhibited. When positive behaviors are observed, take the opportunity to praise the teachers in front of others if appropriate; that is, the praise must be authentic.

2. Give them responsibilities appropriate to the situation.

This advice may go against the principal's instincts, but as Herzberg informed us, giving people responsibility is a powerful motivator. When appropriate, involving peers can potentially have several positive outcomes, including building positive relationships with others; and when paired with positive people, the difficult teachers have good role models to emulate.

3. Raise discomfort levels of difficult teachers in terms of their negative behaviors. This process includes approaching them about their negative behaviors, which in turn will help them accept responsibility for their situation.

4. Help difficult teachers improve their interpersonal intelligence. "Principals must share with them how they are coming across" to others (Whitaker, 2002, p. 57).

5. Establish expectations that negative behaviors are not acceptable in the school and that they help create poor school climates. Two critical times or locations for high expectations of positive behaviors are during all meetings and in the teachers' lounge.

How the principal communicates or approaches difficult teachers (or anyone for that matter) is critical to the principal's

effectiveness. Whitaker wrote:

Make sure that you do not treat them in the manner that they treat others. Never raise your voice, use sarcasm, or treat them rudely. It is also critical that we do not take a confrontational or argumentative approach. . . . Realize that your positive and productive teachers want these negative staff members dealt with, but they want it done in a professional manner. (p. 27)

Never have difficult discussions or in any way be critical of individuals' behavior in front of others. In other words, don't embarrass them in front of their peers or superiors. It will only make them more defensive and does nothing to correct their negative behaviors.

Finally, the principal should be sure all leaders in the organization understand and apply the above principles of dealing with difficult people. Assistant principals, team leaders, professional learning community (PLC) facilitators, and other leaders should be trained in dealing with difficult individuals, as they are even more likely to encounter negative behaviors. Difficult staff members can be intimidating and stressful for any leader.

In today's collaborative schools, where PLCs, distributed leadership, and team decision making are the norm, school leaders must do everything they can to deal with difficult teachers and staff who refuse to collaborate. Marzano et al. (2016) state, "Administrators must react and get involved when collaborative teams are not functioning well, or they risk damaging the entire culture of collaboration in the school" (p. 110). At times, school leaders will be faced with situations in which they must have difficult conversations with individuals who refuse to collaborate or who in some way work against others. Below is one example of how to structure such difficult conversations (Abrams, 2009, p. 64):

- Setting the tone and purpose of the conversation

- Getting to the point and naming it professionally
- Giving specific examples
- Describing the effect of this behavior on the school or colleagues or students
- Sharing your willingness to resolve the issue and have a dialogue and discussion.

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Dealing with Stress from Conflict

With conflict comes stress, and leaders generally feel the most stress as they are expected to manage the conflict, as Heifetz and Linsky ([2002](#)) pointed out. Drawing attention to tough questions and bringing conflicts to the surface to deal with them will increase stress on all individuals involved, which, in turn, increases stress levels. Heifetz and Linsky suggested that leaders can create a “holding environment” (safe place) within which to deal with the tough issues (e.g., hiring an outside facilitator, going on a retreat to a different location, establishing a culture that disagreement is fine, but not hostility). As group

and individual tensions increase due to normal conflict, leaders can “lower the temperature” by doing the following:

1. Address the technical aspects of the problem.
2. Establish a structure for the problem-solving process.
3. Temporarily reclaim responsibility for the tough decision.
4. Employ work avoidance mechanisms.
5. Slow down the process of challenging norms and expectations. (p. 111)

Item number 4 in the above list needs some explanation. Heifetz and Linsky simply mean that leaders give individuals and groups temporary breaks from the conflicting situations as needed. Item number 5, slowing down the process of challenging norms and expectations, is difficult in education because of expectations of stakeholders and pressures brought by the outside environment (e.g., NCLB and ESSA) to make significant and continual improvements.

In the UCEA “Voices from the Field” project, Alsbury and Whitaker ([2012](#)) reported that superintendents and principals coped with stress at a personal level with “stress-reduction activities, like meditation, relaxation training, physical exercise,

health and wellness programs, and time-management training. Indeed, school leaders reported that the most effective coping mechanisms included physical exercise, talking with friends, and venting to their spouse” (p. 184). Alsbury and Whitaker recommended school districts develop programs to help administrators deal with stress, including setting up effective mentoring and networking relationships, as well as professional development programs to help administrators develop coping mechanisms for job-related stress. They suggested this process would also assist the district in meeting its goal of providing higher quality, sustainable leadership in schools, as these programs will reduce burnout caused by physical and mental exhaustion.

