

Final Thoughts

Organizational conflict has been discussed in this chapter chiefly in terms of two-party clashes within the organization. Whereas conflict was once thought to signal a failure of the organization, it is increasingly recognized as a normal and legitimate aspect of human social systems. Thus, not only is conflict inevitable but also, contrary to earlier views, it can serve a useful function by stimulating creative solutions to problems.

Whether organizational conflict is destructive or constructive depends to a large extent on how it is managed. Healthy organizations—characterized by well-developed problem-solving mechanisms and a collaborative climate—are able to identify conflict and deal with it in a collaborative way that leaves the organization stronger and better developed rather than weakened and wracked with hostility.

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Ways of handling conflict in school districts and schools have been heavily influenced by the people who have been consulted for advice or by third-party intervention. Especially with the spread of collective bargaining, school districts have turned increasingly for advice to people trained and conditioned to view conflict in adversarial, combative terms (lawyers and, not infrequently, professional negotiators and mediators), rather than people trained and conditioned to view it as a phenomenon of organizational behavior (applied social scientists, organizational psychologists). Too often this decision has produced essentially destructive win-lose strategies and tactics.

This chapter has proposed a way of diagnosing conflict in a given situation as a basis for choosing an appropriate management strategy. Clearly, there is no one best way of managing conflict in organizations. A number of ways to manage it are available, however, each suited to circumstances in a particular situation. The basic principle in choosing a way of managing conflict, however, is to use the approach most likely to minimize the destructive aspects (for example, hostility) and to maximize the opportunities for organizational growth and development.

Finally, no phase of conflict management is more critical than diagnosing the situation. Frequently, the processes of conceptualizing, or analyzing, conflict confuses effects with causes. For example, a superintendent of schools asked a consultant, "What are some of the ways that I can deal with conflict in this school district?" When asked what kind of conflict he was talking about, the superintendent replied, "Well, you know, we had that teachers' strike and it was pretty bad here. Now the teachers are back at work, but we have a lot of bad feeling everywhere. You know—hostility. We have to do something about it. What can we do?" Although, as we have explained, hostility is an important aspect of conflict, it is vital to bear in mind that hostility does not describe a conflict itself. Hostility is an emotional reaction that is all too often part of the outcome or aftermath of an episode of conflict. But trying to ameliorate hostile feelings is, perhaps, dealing with a symptom rather than a cause. If we fail to diagnose the conflict correctly and deal with the causes, the conflict will continue under the surface, ready to manifest itself at a later time.

