

THE EMOTIONAL CONNECTION OF DISTINGUISHING DIFFERENCES AND CONFLICT

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In recent years, diversity in organizations has been an exciting, stimulating, frustrating, and intriguing topic. Some organizations continue to struggle for diversity whereas others have a fully integrated diverse workforce. The challenge to increase and manage diversity continues to be critical to organizational goals, particularly as more organizations, large and small, transact business internationally. Some organizations work to appreciate diversity and value differences, whereas others continue to discount differences and diversity. Smart managers today realize the importance of balance in work groups. Attempts to incorporate differences in age, gender, race, culture, sexual preference, and styles of being in their organizations to capitalize on the incredible potential diversity offers are occurring. Managing differences requires energy, commitment, tolerance, and finally, appreciation among all parties involved. Differences among people are not inherently good or bad; there is no one "right" way to deal with differences. Learning to manage and ultimately appreciate differences requires learning, emotional growth, and stretching the boundaries of all participants. Although differences can be challenging, they also lead to very important benefits, both to individuals, groups and organizations.

HOW DIFFERENCES ARE OFTEN MANAGED

What action and factors must be uppermost in selecting the most appropriate approach to addressing differences? Often avoidance or repression is used to manage differences. The avoidance of differences often takes the form of associating with individuals of similar backgrounds, experiences, beliefs, and values. This strategy enables an environment of mutual support and predictability. Those who are adverse to risk or challenges are apt to select this strategy. Another avoidance strategy is to separate individuals who create sparks between each other. Although this strategy may reduce tension, it minimizes the opportunity for individuals and the organization to learn and grow.

The repression of differences occurs when an individual or organization refuses to allow disagreements to emerge. Top management often influences the culture by stressing conformity, which naturally affects diversity. Statements by managers such as: "We must work on this project in a professional and collegial manner," or "By working together cooperatively, we will succeed during these difficult times," create the boundaries for behavior limited to cooperation, collaboration, and loyalty and limit the opportunity for challenging assumptions, testing new ideas,

and strategies for success. Repression is quite costly. Resistances develop that have both organizational and individual consequences. Blocking strong feelings and repressing differences may result in desensitization and loss of productivity. When individual differences come together, managers exert control to reduce conflict.

Both appropriate times and dangers are associated with the use of avoidance and repression in managing differences. Teams or work groups faced with tight deadlines may want to limit the number and type of ideas generated. Avoidance may be an appropriate interim strategy for dealing with differences by enabling an individual to learn more about a person or situation before advancing a stance. The challenge to management is to decide when it is most appropriate to use these approaches. The skill level of the manager, rather than an overt choice, may also influence the decision. Avoidance can lead to groupthink, which occurs when everyone in a group agrees with everyone else, even though there are differences among group members. Groupthink is the result of not challenging ideas, opinions, values, or beliefs. Individuals may not believe it is safe (concerns about advancing or retaining one's job) to challenge, particularly if management does not model this behavior.

Still another danger in avoiding differences is overcompatibility. When overcompatibility exists in an organization, it may be due to a strong need for support, reassurance, or security or a need to eliminate perceived threats. In an organization, this can severely hamper the development of new ideas, productivity, growth, and development. Avoidance and repression of differences are not viable solutions. When differences are present, they must be expressed and worked through. If not, unnecessary conflict will result.

POSITIVE ASPECTS OF DIFFERENCES

- Differences are opportunities. The old adage "Two heads are better than one" has merit. When combining multiple perspectives, one gains a richer set of experiences, and the variability of these often leads to a more creative approach than could be achieved independently.
- Differences are tests to the strength of a position. One needs to be sure all the perspectives, opinions, and perceptions enhance the final product.

A healthy interaction among differences (gender, age, race, culture, etc.) could address the preceding concerns. Two factors influence the treatment of differences: first, the needs, wants and goals of the individual; and second, the value placed on the relationship. People are often motivated by the desire to meet their needs and satisfy their wants and desires. The stronger the motivation, the greater the likelihood of addressing differences. Furthermore, when the persons involved are important to each other, or valued, the tendency to manage the difference increases to preserve the relationship. The reverse is likely when there is no value in the relationship. Once these factors are assessed, it becomes necessary to recognize behavior and attitudes that *will* be helpful in managing the differences.

Differences are not problems to be solved; they are dilemmas to be managed. Successful managers of difference reduce their judgments and accept the difference as legitimate. Clear boundaries between self and others, a willingness and interest in being influenced, and an awareness of choice with the ability to make choices are also helpful. Using strong language such as *ought to*, *cannot*, *necessary*, *impossible*, *requirement*, or *mandate* will diminish success.

Differences are experienced from contact with others who are dissimilar. A range of life experiences and success in interpersonal relationships support the ability to deal with differences.

Individuals who have travelled nationally and internationally or who have had unusual experiences, beyond the normal scope of their daily activities tend to develop an appreciation for differences, even though at the time of initial contact there may have been challenges, fear, and longing for what is familiar. Managing differences is not an individual process; it is interactive among individuals. When only one individual is attempting to deal with the difference, the result is coping behavior. Dealing with differences evokes emotion. A range of emotions for human interaction that leads to awareness of differences is necessary. These emotions can lead to conflict but conflict is *not* a prerequisite to managing differences. Differences evoke emotions, ranging from small or minor to large and major. An inverted triangle graphically shows the escalating intensity in each level of emotion as differences are encountered (see Figure 1-2).

This model is based on the assumption that difficulties will likely result from contact with differences. The first level involves an awareness of the difference. Here the parties are exploring and learning about each other—what is similar, what is not, what is discomforting; the second level may result. One becomes uncomfortable with boundaries being pushed while values or beliefs are challenged. When the differences appear to be greater than the similarities, annoyance occurs. The parties are not able to appreciate how their differences may be beneficial to each other. Irritation, on the next level, may result from continued exploration, possibly through a dialectic process. Tension is heightening as more contact occurs; there is possibly an overlay of fear. The boundaries of self are threatened (What will happen to me if I continue with this encounter?), and frustration leading to open disagreement develops.

Anger, often a protective strategy, shifts the emotions to the next level, and hostility erupts while the dispute solidifies. Each party has a firm stance reflecting their position. The final level is conflict or war, where each party works hard to repress, neutralize or destroy the other.

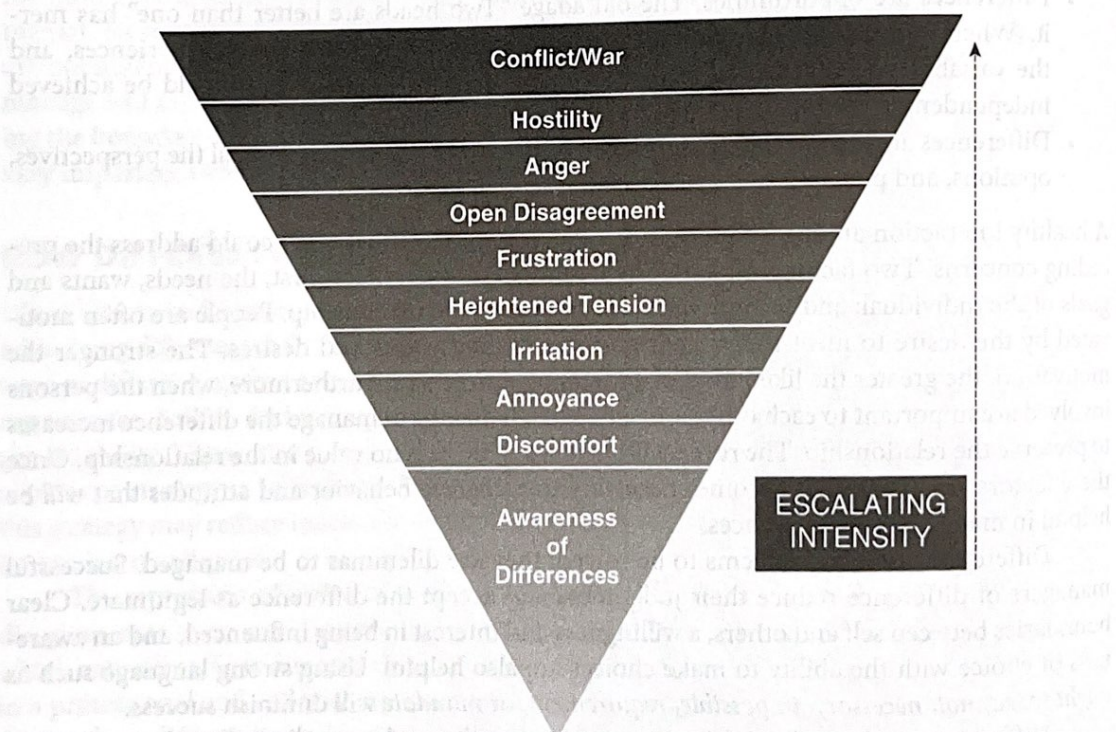


FIGURE 1-2 The Escalation of Differences into Conflict

In Figure 1, we suggest that an individual, group, organization, or society may, depending on the situation, traverse through each of these emotional levels when encountering differences. The process is not necessarily a linear one. Emotions run deep on various issues and could erupt immediately from awareness to hostility or anger or any other step on the triangle. In fact, awareness can lead to avoidance, tolerance, or appreciation.

Recent history lends itself to application to the triangle. In 1993, terrorists, who had different values and beliefs than most Americans, bombed the New York City World Trade Center. The explosion caused six deaths, 1,042 injuries, and nearly \$600 million in damages. Americans were shocked, and then President Clinton declared that every effort should be taken to bring those responsible to justice. Swift actions lead to the prosecution and conviction of four of seven co-conspirators. Yet, the American public, although outraged and frightened by the experience, only demonstrated minimal awareness that there were dramatic differences between the U.S. foreign policy and those on the receiving end of the policy. Not until seven years later, with the attacks on the World Trade Center, along with the Pentagon, did awareness shift to outrage, anger, hostility, and ultimately conflict/war.

During the aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001, when thousands of people from many countries met their peril in the attack on the World Trade Center, the United States unified against all who would harm her. In many instances, those who disagreed with the policy to go to war against those responsible for this terrorist act were afraid to speak out. It was considered anti-American to express different opinions about how to handle terrorist activity focused on the United States. Such behavior is an example of groupthink, mentioned earlier in this chapter. The government is particularly susceptible to groupthink where patriotism must be at the highest, yet evidence of dissent tends to make its way to the media, newsprint, or television. Still, individuals may be reluctant to speak candidly against the actions of government policy.

Conflict, at the top of the triangle, may result or emerge from differences. There are many definitions of conflict. Listed here are typical examples of definitions:

1. Conflict exists when two or more parties want the same thing or their wants are incompatible in some way.
2. Conflict must involve emotionality; it is a disturbing emotion within ourselves and may involve feelings of anger and frustration.
3. The higher the stakes, the greater the conflict; one must *care* to have conflict.
4. Conflict can be internal: within oneself, a group, or between groups. Conflict involves competition of wants and viewpoints.
5. Conflict can be enjoyable.

It is important to distinguish conflict from difference. Difference and conflict are both important and necessary ingredients in human interaction and, if valued, can lead to opportunity, creativity, and appreciation. Difference is a component of diversity, which is a constant in our environment. Managers and the workforce are grappling with this constant and learning that appreciating or valuing differences opens the door to new and creative ways of addressing organizational challenges. For example, when a group of salaried and union personnel from the automotive industry were invited to identify adjectives they associate with conflict, most of the language was highly charged, emotional, and violent (see Table 1). The autoworkers pointed out that differences can lead to conflict and cited examples including the inability to motivate employees to complete their assigned jobs, poor communication, pressures concerning time, inequity in work assignments, differences of opinions, and methods for getting work done. They further pointed out how important it is for people to listen to each other and pay attention to the

Table 1-1 Distinguishing Difference and Conflict

Conflict	Difference
Anger	Opinions
War	Ideas
Tension	Options
Kill	Methods
Hostility	Skills
Shouting	Race Gender
	Jobs
	Age
	Interpretation
	Values
	Environment

difference, incorporating the difference in the process of solving a problem or completing a task, not just engaging in conflict because of the difference.

It was believed that when a diverse team worked together, there was greater creativity and innovation, a sense of connectedness, more risk taking, less boredom, higher productivity, and greater cooperation. On the other hand, the mismanagement of differences or engaging in conflictual behavior in the organization would most likely lead to higher stress, individual withdrawal, limited learning, less risk taking, overcompatability, interpersonal tension, and decreased communication.

THE EMOTIONAL CONNECTION

Emotional intelligence is one key to developing the ability to manage and appreciate differences. Emotional intelligence involves at least five elements: awareness of self, the ability to recognize personal emotions when they are occurring; managing self, which involves awareness of and engaging in emotions that are appropriate to a situation; self-motivation, putting emotional energy into action for a useful person and controlling emotions when necessary; awareness of emotions in others, which involves empathy and demonstrating caring when appropriate; and finally, managing interpersonal relationships, which involves dealing with both self and others in social, professional and personal interactions (Goleman, 1995). Emotional intelligence, then, is the ability to be aware of, name, and manage individual experience of emotions. The triangle in Figure 1 illustrates the escalating intensity of emotions when differences are mismanaged or misunderstood and develop into conflict. Managers must recognize that it is the diversity in styles of interacting and the particular way a person or group makes meaning of their experience that creates the experience of difference. Difference enables choice and opportunity as much as it may create tension and insecurity; this also enables the organization to achieve its objectives. Differences provide opportunities to develop our emotional intelligence. According to Cherniss and Goleman (2001), managers and workers who develop their emotional intelligence may be able to improve

their effectiveness at work and potential for advancement. In addition, personal relationships will also improve and strengthen when an individual develops emotional intelligence.

The family unit is an excellent and readily accessible unit for exploring and experimenting with emotional intelligence. Our home life is often a place where we must manage differences with significant consequences for either harmony or unrest. One answer to understanding the emotional impact of encountering differences at home or in the work environment may come with knowledge of three major transitions occurring in contemporary society. Fritz Capra (1982) suggests that a paradigm shift in the thoughts, perceptions, and values that form a particular view of reality is essential if the world is to survive. This is a pattern or paradigm shift involving moving from certainty to uncertainty, closed to open systems, truth to no truth, and a realization of multiple realities coexisting in a complex society. Recognition and mastery of this paradigm shift may prove to be a motivation for developing the emotional skills necessary for valuing diversity and managing differences.

Historically, it has not been acceptable for professionals to exhibit emotions in the workplace; with the introduction of emotional intelligence, there is more acceptance of the whole person and the resulting complexity. When managing diversity or differences, one has at least four options for guiding behavior: avoidance, conflict, tolerance, and appreciation. Avoidance provides an opportunity to learn more about the difference before declaring a stance. In this sense, avoidance as a strategy for managing differences may facilitate new learning and greater opportunity for future interaction of a productive nature. On the other hand, avoidance may be a survival strategy between different status levels within the organization. Clearly, a manager may tell a subordinate to "sit down and just be quiet." Under these circumstances, the worker could jeopardize their position with the organization if they chose to noncompliance.

Tolerance as a strategy may be influenced by status within the organization. Managers generally have the power and authority to get their viewpoints adopted. Nonmanagers often must compromise or tolerate the views of their managers, even when they feel the freedom to express an opposing viewpoint. Oftentimes, adopting tolerance is necessary because it allows for the expression of differences; however, when there is an imbalance of power, the options for influence are limited. The upside of tolerance is an individual's opportunity to express a point of view that is active involvement rather than passive participation in an event. Conflict as a strategy may also serve some purpose. Conflict involves direct and active resistance to another and may involve judgments of good, bad, right, or wrong. Often conflict occurs more openly among managers, who have higher status and more latitude than subordinates in resisting a point of view or directives of each other and top management. Finally, appreciation of differences or diversity demonstrates a high degree of personal development and growth at the individual level. The process of appreciation involves a collaborative interaction among various parties with differences. When differences are appreciated, there are usually organizational norms that support the freedom of expression without fear of reprisal. With the ability to discuss differences openly, using a dialectical process, parties are often able to employ multiple strategies, resulting ultimately in appreciation. Appreciation results from applying the skills of emotional intelligence mentioned earlier.

Developing healthy ways to acknowledge and respond to diversity (differences) and the emotions evoked increases our ability to not only manage ourselves but also to manage others in workplace and personal settings. Employing a combination of strategies such as conflict, avoidance, tolerance, and appreciation may demonstrate the capacity of an individual to manage differences and value diversity.