Basic Techniques for Resolving Conflict

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Learning Objectives

After reading and studying this chapter and doing the exercises, you should be able to:

1. Identify five steps to workplace conflict resolution.
2. Summarize the traditional conflict-resolution styles.
3. Be prepared to apply a variety of techniques for resolving conflict.
4. Pinpoint several additional behaviors and attitudes for resolving conflict.

Chapter Outline

Workplace conflict is inevitable, and leaders and managers spend an estimated 20 percent of their time resolving conflict. An understanding of and skill in resolving conflict are therefore success factors for leaders and managers as well as corporate professionals and business owners. An important general consideration is to face conflict rather than letting conflict slide or glossing over it. Ignoring or glossing over conflict does not resolve the real causes of conflict and seldom leads to a long-term solution.

In this chapter we describe a variety of approaches to resolving workplace conflict. A description of one conception of five steps to workplace conflict resolution is followed by a summary of the five frequently quoted traditional conflict-resolution styles. We then describe several basic techniques for resolving conflict, followed by a list of useful behaviors and attitudes suited to conflict resolution.

Five Steps to Workplace Conflict Resolution

Many different approaches to resolving conflict in the workplace are possible, including the techniques described in this chapter, along with Chapters 10–12. Conflict specialist Patricia Lotich has developed a five-step model for conflict resolution in the workplace. The model is presented here because it integrates several well-accepted ideas about negotiation and managing conflict. Lotich also recommends intervening in the conflict at its beginning rather than allowing it to fester and become too difficult to resolve.[1]

Step 1: Separate the people from the problem, and focus on the process. The conflict is about the process, not the person. Focus on the issue, and avoid linking the issue to a particular individual or group. Most conflicts are about limited resources, such as different groups wanting a bigger chunk of the budget. If the conflict is about limited resources, investigate how the resources are allocated, rather than focusing on the individuals or groups competing for those resources. For example, it might pay to investigate why the marketing group receives so much money in comparison to the logistics group rather than frame the budget dispute as being between the heads of marketing and logistics. If the conflict is emotionally charged, establish a cooling-off period before attempting to resolve the issue or issues.

Step 2: Identify a mediator. When conflict is intense, it might warrant a neutral party to help mediate. The mediator could be a manager when the conflict is between two subordinates, or it could be a mediation specialist. The mediator will help the parties in conflict to discuss the issues. Among the mediator's activities would be establishing specific guidelines for interacting with each other, as well as identify underlying issues that contribute to the conflict. In the example of the marketing group versus the logistics group, one of the underlying issues might be that the role of logistics in getting products to market is underappreciated.

Lotich presents her own example of identifying underlying issues. She had an employee who was promoted to supervisor and was having a difficult time managing a person who was formerly a coworker. The underlying issue was about dealing with the resentment of the employee who felt that she was bypassed for promotion.

Step 3: Clarify the problem. An essential part of resolving conflict is to take the time to listen to all of the concerns and to attain a clear understanding of the nature of the problem. It is helpful to work toward identifying each party's interests more than

When conflict is intense, it might warrant a neutral part to help mediate.

their positions in relation to the conflict. Understanding another person's interests (why it is important to him or her) contributes to separating the person from the problem. For example, if there are limited resources to support a team project, and you are the manager, listen to the concerns of the parties involved about meeting employee goals. Budget constraints, such as not having the right equipment, can hamper goal attainment.

Step 4: Explore all options. A standard technique is to brainstorm ideas for ways of resolving the problem that would result in a win–win solution. An ideal goal of conflict resolution is to achieve a positive result for all parties, as in negotiation. Achieving this goal will sometimes involve establishing criteria for determining the fairness of the outcome. In the marketing-versus-logistics conflict, one criterion might be that any division of the budget should not force either group to lay off staff.

Step 5. Agree on a resolution. The parties in the conflict should be part of the process to find and agree on a settlement of the conflict. The two sides might reach a spoken agreement that the proposed resolution is the best solution to the problem. At other times, a written agreement might be necessary. The marketing group in question might scrutinize its advertising expenses and find that certain types of advertising might have such low yield that the expense is not justified. These funds could then be shifted to the logistics group in the next budget cycle.

A justification for pursuing the five steps is that organizations that have mastered the art of conflict resolution have a competitive advantage. This is true because positive conflict outcomes decrease performance barriers and enable organizations to more easily reach corporate objectives.

The Traditional Conflict-Resolution Styles

Before describing specific methods of resolving conflict, it is useful to understand the five widely cited styles of handling conflict. As shown in Figure 9.1, the five styles are based on a combination of satisfying one's own concerns (assertiveness) and satisfying the concerns of others (cooperativeness).[2]

1. *Competitive.* The competitive style of managing conflict is a desire to achieve one's own concerns or goals at the expense of the other party or to dominate. A person with a competitive orientation is likely to engage in win–lose power struggles, such as trying to get a rival for a promotion fired. The competitive style is also referred to as *forcing*.

Competitive
High concern for self, low concern for others

Collaborative
High concern for self, high concern for others

Sharing
Looks for compromise, willing to go halfway

Avoidant
Low concern for self, low concern for others

Accommodative
Low concern for self, high concern for others
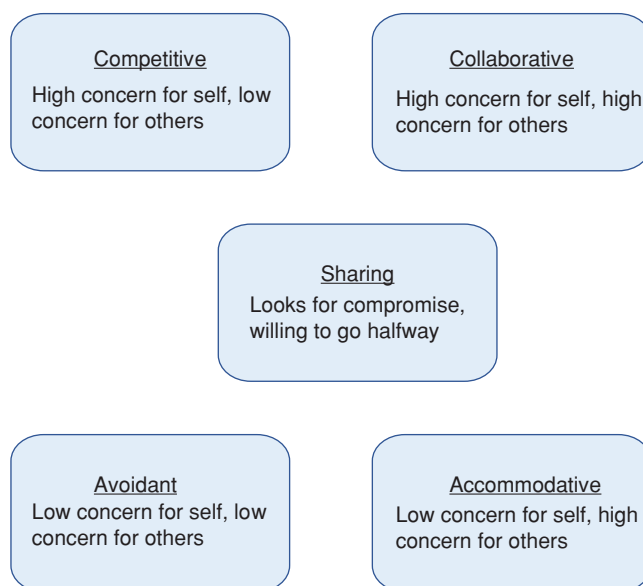
FIGURE 9.1 The Five Traditional Conflict-Management Styles

Source: fizkes/Shutterstock

The competitive style of managing conflict is a desire to achieve one's own concerns or goals at the expense of the other party, or to dominate.

win–win The belief that after a conflict has been resolved, both sides should gain something of value.

2. *Accommodative.* The accommodative style favors appeasement or satisfying the other's concerns without taking care of one's own. People with this orientation may be generous or self-sacrificing just to maintain a relationship. A dissatisfied employee might be accommodated with a larger-than-average pay increase just to calm the employee down and obtain his or her loyalty.

3. *Sharing.* The sharing style is halfway between domination and appeasement. Sharers prefer moderate but incomplete satisfaction for both parties, which results in a compromise. The phrase "splitting the difference" reflects this orientation and is commonly used in such activities as negotiating a budget or purchasing equipment. A compromise between an open-space office plan and cubicles might be an open-space plan but with cubicles readily available when privacy is needed.

4. *Collaborative*. In contrast to the other styles, the collaborative style reflects a desire to satisfy the needs of both parties. It is based on an underlying philosophy of **win–win**, the belief that after conflict has been resolved, both sides should gain something of value. (You will recognize win–win as the integrative approach to negotiation). A win–win approach is genuinely concerned with arriving at a settlement that meets the needs of both parties or that at least does not badly damage the welfare of either side. When a collaborative approach is used, the relationship between the parties improves. An example of a win–win approach would be for a manager to permit a call-center employee to work from home provided that his or her productivity increased enough to pay for the equipment needed to set up a work station at home.

   A study was conducted with 139 working adults about the link between the use of the collaborative style and emotional intelligence when working in teams. The results consistently showed that individuals with high emotional intelligence preferred to seek collaborative solutions when facing conflict.[3] These results make sense because a key component of emotional intelligence is the ability to build constructive relationships, and collaboration facilitates such relationships.

5. *Avoidant*. The avoider is both uncooperative and unassertive. He or she is indifferent to the concerns of either party. The person may actually withdraw from the conflict, rely on fate, or try to suppress the conflict. A manager sometimes uses the avoidant style to stay out of a conflict between two team members, who are left to resolve their own conflict.

   The five styles of management conflict have implications for other aspects of workplace behavior. A study was conducted with 320 public service workers from five states in Nigeria that explored the relationship between conflict-resolution strategies and organizational citizenship behavior (OCB). Such behavior reflects a willingness to work for the good of the organization even without the promise of a specific reward.

   The public service workers were chosen for the study because, at the time, many public enterprises had undergone organizational change and restructuring in order to improve organizational efficiency and competitiveness. As a result, there was a retrenchment of many workers in the public service. The retrenchment had serious psychological consequences for both laid-off workers and the layoff survivors who remained on the job. The strike negotiations, protests, and pleas of the workers'

union halted the government from continuing with the retrenchment. It appeared likely that managers at most government ministries and firms used a combination of conflict-resolution strategies to resolve the conflicts that arose. Layoff survivors experienced job insecurity, lowered morale, decreased loyalty, distrust, and reduced productivity. Other negative consequences of the layoff included less creativity, organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and OCB.

A major finding of the study was that the avoiding style (including forcing a solution and withdrawing) was negatively related to OCB on the part of subordinates. The more the managers used forcing, or withdrawing, to end the conflict, the less the subordinates developed OCBs. An explanation for these findings is that when subordinates feel they have been denied the opportunity to share and exchange information on a conflict issue, they will feel unfairly treated. In exchange, the workers may not develop high OCB. Instead, they may feel aggrieved and frustrated and not bother going beyond their job responsibilities to help coworkers or the organization.

The study also found that confronting, compromising, and smoothing strategies were positively associated with OCB. An additional finding was that employees who scored high on a test of emotional intelligence were more likely to develop OCB. One rationale offered for this finding is that workers with high emotional intelligence are able to adopt effective coping strategies to deal with the stress caused by unfair treatment by superiors. Consequently, it is easier for them to develop organizational citizenship behaviors.[4]

These five styles of managing conflict provide useful cornerstone knowledge about the subject. Yet these styles are cited so frequently, some readers are prompted to think that these styles represent the only way to manage and resolve conflict. In reality, conflict resolution in particular encompasses many different techniques.

The accompanying self-quiz provides you an opportunity to think through your basic approach to management and resolving conflict.

A Variety of Techniques for Resolving Conflict

Styles of dealing with conflict are closely related to methods of resolving conflict. For example. a collaborative style is a way of managing and resolving conflict. In this section we present a sampling of basic conflict-resolution methods. The methods of conflict resolution presented in Chapter 10 might be considered more advanced, but the distinction between basic and advanced should not be considered as absolute.

Confrontation and Problem Solving

A widely applicable approach to resolving conflict is **confrontation and problem solving**, a method of identifying the true source of conflict and resolving it systematically. The confrontation approach is gentle and tactful rather than combative and abusive. Reasonableness is important because the person who takes the initiative to resolve the conflict wants to maintain a harmonious relationship with the other party. Resolving a conflict involves emotion, such as being angry with the other side. The best results will be attained if the emotion is expressed in a reasonable yet assertive manner rather than being explosive. A reasonable expression of emotion might be, "I am upset that this problem has lingered so long. I want to resolve it today."

During the confrontation, one person decides to work cooperatively and confronts the second person. At this point, the person confronted may indicate a willingness to accept the confrontation or may decide to gloss over its seriousness. The conflict is often resolved at this step, particularly if it is not serious or complicated. An example might be conflict about how much an executive is spending to entertain customers visiting the company.

After the confrontation, the two parties discuss their own opinions, attitudes, and feelings in relation to the conflict, attempting to identify the real issue. For example, the real cause of conflict between a team leader and a team member might be that they have a

confrontation and problem solving A method of identifying the true source of conflict and resolving it systematically.

Collaborative versus Competitive Styles of Conflict Management and Resolution

Answer on a scale of 1 to 5 how well you agree with each of the following statements: disagree strongly, disagree, neutral, agree, and agree strongly.

Statement about Conflict	Disagree Strongly	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Agree Strongly
1. After a conflict is over, there is one winner and one loser.	5	4	3	2	1
2. Very little besides winning is important when attempting to resolve conflict.	5	4	3	2	1
3. When you root for one team in an athletic contest, it is natural to hate the other side.	5	4	3	2	1
4. I like the idea of shaking hands or bumping fists with the other side after a conflict has been resolved.	1	2	3	4	5
5. The ability to resolve conflict is an important skill for many types of workers.	1	2	3	4	5
6. The winner should take all.	5	4	3	2	1
7. If I lose an argument with someone, I will hold a grudge against him or her.	5	4	3	2	1
8. I like the idea of tournaments in which the first-round losers receive another opportunity to play.	1	2	3	4	5
9. Nice people usually finish last.	5	4	3	2	1
10. The other side in a conflict should be regarded as an enemy rather than a partner.	5	4	3	2	1
11. The other side in a conflict should be regarded as a partner rather than an enemy.	1	2	3	4	5
12. If I lost (or were to lose) a conflict with another person, I would seek revenge.	5	4	3	2	1
13. Being nasty and insulting toward the other side is an effective way of resolving conflict.	5	4	3	2	1
14. I think that labor unions should find a better way than calling a strike to settle a dispute.	1	2	3	4	5
15. I like the idea of social groups rioting to try to get their demands met.	5	4	3	2	1

Scoring and Interpretation: Calculate your score by adding up the numbers circled:

60–75: You prefer a *collaborative* or *win–win* approach to resolving conflict. You tend to be concerned about finding long-term solutions to conflict that benefit both sides.

15–59: You prefer a *competitive* or *win–lose* approach to resolving conflict. You want to maximize gain for your-self, with little concern about the welfare of the other side. In an organization that emphasizes collaboration, this approach to conflict resolution would not be welcome. You might also develop the reputation of being overly aggressive during conflict resolution or negotiation.

different concept of what constitutes a fair day's work. After understanding the real issue, the parties attempt to develop specific means of reducing or eliminating the cause of the conflict.

If the cause cannot be changed (such as changing one's opinion of a fair day's work), a way of working around the cause is devised. In this example, more specific output goals might be jointly agreed on. If both parties agree on a solution, then the confrontation

has been successful. After the solution has been implemented, both parties should check periodically to ensure that their agreements are being kept.

The collaborative style of conflict resolution meshes together confrontation and problem solving. A major outcome is that trust is built between two parties as they search for the real reason for the conflict. Both the collaborative style of conflict resolution and confrontation and problem solving are therefore designed to achieve win–win solutions to conflict.

Win–Lose Conflict Resolution

The opposite approach to win–win conflict resolution is *win–lose*, in which one side attempts to maximize gain at the expense of the other. As in negotiation, win–lose is also referred to as a *zero-sum game*, in which one side wins nothing and the other side wins everything. Many people believe that win–lose is the best approach to resolving conflict, contributing to the fact that so much conflict goes unresolved in the form of bankruptcies, voluntary turnover, involuntary turnover, and physical attacks in the workplace. A person with a competitive orientation is likely to engage in power struggles in which one side wins and the other loses. "My way or the highway" is a win–lose strategy.

If faced with an adversary who has a win–lose orientation, a plausible defense is to keep pointing out the benefits of finding a solution that fits both sides. Highland Hospital in Rochester, New York, developed such a consistently heavy patient load that it proposed erecting a new five-story building on the perimeter of its premises to accommodate more patients and enlarged medal services. Members of the town board attempted to block the construction of the new medical building because it did not fit the character of the residential neighborhood in which the hospital was located. Hospital officials emphasized how an expanded medical facility would help the community.

The two sides sat down for a two-hour meeting on a Monday among neighborhood representatives, hospital officials, and city staffers. Soon both sides reached a workable compromise on rezoning. The new building at the perimeter of the property would be three stories or 60 feet high and set as far back on the hospital property as architecturally feasible. Highland Hospital officials also agreed to cap future construction at 9 stories instead of 11 at the center of the property.[5]

If faced with an adversary who has a win–lose orientation, a plausible defense is to keep on pointing out the benefits of finding a solution that fits both sides.

Confront, Contain, and Connect for Anger

A variation of confrontation and problem solving has been developed specifically to resolve conflict with angry people, and it involves confronting, containing, and connecting. You *confront* by jumping right in and getting an agitated worker talking to prevent future blowups. The confrontation, however, is not aimed at arguing with the angry worker. If the person yells, you talk more softly. You *contain* by moving an angry worker out of sight and earshot. At the same time, you remain impartial. The supervisor is advised not to choose sides or appear to be a friend. Finally, you *connect* by asking open-ended questions, such as "What would you like us to do about your concern?" to get to the real issues behind an outburst.

Using this approach, one worker revealed he was upset because a female coworker got to leave early to pick up her daughter at daycare. The man also needed to leave early one day a week for personal reasons but felt awkward making the request. So instead of asserting himself in an explicit and direct manner about his needs, he flared up.

An important feature of the confront, contain, and connect technique is that it provides angry workers a place where they can vent their frustrations without embarrassing

themselves. Mediator Nina Meierding says: "Workers need a safe outlet to talk through anger and not feel they will be minimized or put their job in jeopardy."[6]

The accompanying Negotiation and Conflict Resolution in Action feature describes how many workers throughout the world are attempting to deal with conflicts and other sources of stress in settings built for that purpose.

NEGOTIATION AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN ACTION

Rage Rooms for Dealing with Conflict

A woman from an information technology (IT) firm frustrated by the many conflicts and challenges she faced in work and personal life moved through a warehouse alternately swinging a baseball bat, a golf club, and a sledgehammer. Her aim was to destroy office equipment and glass bottles placed on a table. When the woman completed her rage episode, she was applauded and given a bottle of water by the owners of Smash the Rage—Kathy Barros, a human resources (HR) professional, and Massiel Reye, a recruiter. The two owners operate their rage room at night and on the weekends in Miami, Florida.

Smash the Rage is one of many "rage rooms" located in the United States and across the world. Patrons of these rooms are encouraged to vent their anger in an appropriate and controlled environment. A statement on the Smash the Rage website reads, "Your heart is pounding. You're clenching your fists. You're red in the face. You just want to smash." The Break Club, a rage room in Buenos Aries, Argentina, says that corporations send their employees to the club.

At Smash Therapy in Rochester, New York, patrons wear closed-toes shoes and head-to-head protective gear. They enter a room where they can lash out at glass items, electronics, and other breakables using a crowbar, baseball bat, or sledgehammer, "without consequences or public embarrassment." A Smash Therapy crew cleans up afterward and sends the debris for recycling. The Riot Room, also in Rochester, offers ax-throwing and has a bar in a separate area. Although bar patrons are able to use the rage room and the ax-throwing area, Riot Room employees are instructed to deny people access if they appear to be inebriated.

Workplace frustrations, usually stemming from conflict, are the primary reasons most patrons visit Smash Therapy. Barrios said that some are repeat customers, and many are referrals. A lot of retail employees come in and complain about customers. Other issues are people feeling frustrated with their workloads, their bosses, and their colleagues.

The low-end price is $30 for people who bring in their own box of items to smash during a 15-minute session. An "office smash" costs $100 for one person for 25 minutes. Similar to other rage rooms, patrons must sign a waiver and wear closed-toe shoes and protective gear, including a safety suit, a helmet with a safety shield, and goggles.

The proprietors of Smash the Rage source most of their materials for destruction through conducting bulk pickups from people wanting to discard items. After the rage session, the smashed items, including glass and metal, are sorted for recycling or disposal.

A disclaimer on the company website reads as follows: "Smash the Rage does not claim to be a mental help or medical facility. We do not treat, give diagnosis, or provide medical therapy of any kind. We are classified as entertainment only. If you feel that you have any mental or medical issues that need to be treated, please see a licensed physician or obtain a referral." A patron of Smash the Rage posted on Facebook: "Awesome experience. Definitely therapeutic."

Many mental health professionals question the value of rage rooms. According to Dr. Nelly Ali-Klein, a psychiatrist who specializes in aggression and intermittent explosive disorders, smashing objects to show anger is counterproductive in the modern world. "The police will call on you. You will lose your job. Your spouse will hate you. Your children will be afraid," said Alia-Klein. By destroying things when a given situation makes you angry, you are training your brain to go into "destroy mode" every time you feel that way.

Questions

1. If conflict at work or at school created considerable stress for you, would you consider going to a rage room to feel better and resolve the conflict?
2. What are your thoughts on companies offering rage-room benefits, perhaps even with a rage room on company premises?

Source: Original story based on facts and observations in the following sources: Carol Brzozowski, "Rage Rooms offer a Chance to Vent . . . and Smash Stuff," *Workforce*, March/April 2019, p. 10; Marcia Greenwood, "Rochester Rage Rooms Are All the Rage," *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, November 6, 2018; "New Businesses Let You Smash Your Way through Stress and Anger," Healthline (www.healthline.com), November 6 , 2013, pp. 1–6; "Miami's Very First Rage Room: Smash the Rage," *Smash the Rage* (www.smashtherage.com), pp. 1–4.

Reframing through Cognitive Restructuring and Asking Questions

Another useful approach to resolving conflict is to reexamine or *reframe* the conflict situation by looking at in a different light. Two practical approaches follow for reframing: one by searching for the positives in the situation, and the other by asking questions.

Reframing through Cognitive Restructuring

An indirect way of resolving interpersonal conflict is to lessen the conflicting elements in a situation by viewing them more positively. According to the technique of **cognitive restructuring**, you mentally convert negative aspects into positive ones by looking for the positive elements in a situation. According to cognitive-restructuring theory, people can cope better with difficult situations by changing the way they think about stressors.[7] How you frame or choose your thoughts can determine the outcome of a conflict situation. Your thoughts can influence your actions. If your search for the beneficial elements in the situation, there will be less area for dispute. Although this technique might sound like a mind game, it can work effectively.

> **cognitive restructuring**
> A way of resolving interpersonal conflict by mentally converting negative aspects into positive ones by looking for the positive elements in the situation.

   Imagine that one of Samantha's coworkers, Gordon, has asked her repeated questions about how to get approval to authorize a discount for a customer. Samantha is about ready to tell Gordon, "Go bother somebody else. I am not paid to be a trainer." Instead, she looks for the positive element in the situation. She says to herself, "Gordon has been asking me a lot of questions. This does take time, but answering these questions is a valuable experience. If I aspire to become a manager, I will have to help group members with problems."

   After having completed this cognitive restructuring. Samantha can then deal with the situation more positively. She might say to Gordon, "I welcome the opportunity to help you, but we need to find a mutually convenient time. In this way, I can better concentrate on my own work."

Reframing by Asking Questions

Another way to use reframing is to step back, take a deep breath, and then ask all or some of the following questions about the conflict situation arising within the work group:

- Do I fully understand the situation?
- Is the person really angry at me or just worried and anxious?
- Do I have all the facts?
- What is the real issue here?
- How would I want to be treated if the situation were reversed?

   By taking such an approach, you are more likely to communicate effectively and constructively with work associates when conflict situations arise. You carefully talk through the issues rather than becoming explosive, defensive, and argumentative. A useful scenario for reframing through questioning would be when a coworker or customer accuses you of negligence.[8]

Five Rules for Dealing Effectively with Organizational Conflict

A supplement to using techniques for resolving conflict is to apply basic rules to facilitate effective conflict management. As formulated by Jeffrey Pfeffer, a professor of organizational behavior at the Graduate School of Business, Stanford University, these rules can sometimes substitute for using a specific technique.[9]

1. *Stay focused on the most essential objectives.* Conflicts in organizations often involve side issues, such as the other side being rude or making petty demands. It is best to not pay too much attention to these issues and instead focus on your major objective. Assume that Janice, a vice president, is in conflict with other executives about the advisability of outsourcing the company call center. She thinks that the call center should be staffed with company employees in order to have better control

of quality. Janice should stay focused on this objective rather than getting sidelined by minor issues, such as the décor of the call center. In the words of a school system leader, "Figure out what winning looks like. If the conflict were over and you found that you had won, what would that look like?"

2. *Do not fight over things that do not matter.* An extension of the first rule is to not bother fighting about things that are not particularly important. In Janice's situation, one of the executives might insist that if the company staffs its own call center, about one-fifth of the agents should be allowed to work from home in order to save on real estate. Janice does not think this is a good idea, but opposing the idea is not worth the fight if it could mean losing the conflict about whether to outsource the call center.

3. *Build empathy for other people's points of view.* As in negotiation, empathy helps resolve differences. During conflict resolution, it helps to understand the objective and measures of the other side. This requires looking at the world through their eyes and not presuming evil intent. For example, a frequent struggle in the software industry centers on when to release a product. Software developers often want to delay a product release in the pursuit of perfection because the final software reflects the quality of their work. In contrast, sales executives are rewarded for generating revenue and might prefer to sell as soon as possible, then release software patches later on if necessary. Each side is pursuing objectives they think are reasonably consistent with their rewards and professional education—not intentionally trying to be difficult.

4. *Adhere to the adage "keep your friends close and your enemies closer."* It is difficult to follow this advice because most people prefer pleasant interactions with others and avoid discomfort. As a result, we tend to avoid people with whom we are having disagreements. The problem with this standard approach is that you will not know what others are thinking or doing if you do not interact with them. In the case of Janice, she might be aware that another company executive disagrees with most of her opinions and therefore will oppose her plan to keep the call center in house. Janice should therefore do what she can to build an amicable relationship with the executive who opposes her through such means as asking for his input on certain issues and sending him a congratulatory text if warranted.

5. *Use humor to defuse difficult situations.* As mentioned in relation to negotiation, injecting humor into the situation can help defuse tension and build good relations during the time spent in face-to-face or online conflict resolution. Janice might say during her presentation about the value of keeping the call center in house, "Maybe I have a hearing problem, but has anyone else present had difficulty understanding the tech support person from an overseas call center when you tried to resolve a computer issue?"

Pfeffer concludes that workplace conflict is unavoidable. Yet if you keep these simple, but difficult-to-implement, rules in mind you will be able to navigate conflict with better outcomes.

Additional Behaviors and Attitudes for Resolving Conflict

A wide variety of basic behaviors and attitudes are helpful in resolving conflict in addition to those already described in this chapter. The following list of approaches to resolving conflict is based on research from the Program on Negotiation at Harvard Law School, as well as the observations of other sources.[10] A theme of most of these approaches is that it is necessary to overcome the tendency to think that the other side in the conflict is wrong and that the conflict can be resolved by convincing the other side of that fact.

1. *Recognize that all of us have biased perceptions of what is fair.* Our sense of what constitutes a fair conflict resolution is biased by *egocentrism*, the tendency to see things our way and not understand the other side. Research conducted by Carnegie

Mellon University professors Linda Babcock and George Lowenstein indicates that when we are embroiled in a conflict, we need to overcome our egocentric viewpoint of what is fair. A mediator can sometimes help us develop a better understanding of the other side's point of view.

2. *Pause, breathe, and figure out the next steps.* A conflict situation is often stress-provoking, so we need to calm down on the spot. Deep breathing is often an effective instant approach to dealing with stress. After calming down, you might be able to figure out what to do next, such as the best way to deal with a client who threatens to terminate your business relationship. If the solution to the problem is complex, you will need more time to develop a resolution plan. For example, if the client wants to terminate the relationship because of what he or she perceives as poor technical support, you will need time to work on the problem with management.

3. *Look beneath the surface to identify deeper issues.* Many workplace conflicts arise over money, such as a labor union wanting higher wages and benefits for its members or a retail executive wanting more money for enlarging the company's online presence or renovating physical stores. Yet disputes over money often involve deeper sources of conflict, such as the feeling that one is being overlooked or disrespected. For example, a worker who thinks that his or her work is outstanding might want a bonus for financial reasons but also as a form of recognition. When a conflict does arise about money, listening closely to the other's grievances may help resolve the true cause of the conflict. To satisfy the worker in question, a small bonus might be sufficient if it were accompanied by another form of recognition, such as an outstanding performance evaluation.

4. *Assign high priority to building a good relationship.* Many workplace conflicts take place between and among work associates. Maintaining and strengthening the relationship should therefore be as important as winning or getting your way with someone in your organization. Relationships with other stakeholders, such as suppliers and government regulators, are also important. (Yet again, the negotiating strategy of "Allow for face saving" surfaces.)

5. *Avoid escalating tensions with threats and provocative moves.* A poor tactic in terms of its long-term consequences is to threaten the other side, such as threatening to sue to get your demand met or making nasty posts about the person on social media. Litigation may be necessary if the issue cannot be resolved through other means, such as in some patent disputes. Based on the human tendency to reciprocate, the party who receives the threat will often respond in kind, thereby escalating the conflict.

6. *Overcome an "us versus them" mentality.* Intergroup competition can lead to conflict in which suspicion and hostility toward another group arise. As a result, groups in conflict might develop a distorted perception of each other's views and regard the other side's position as more extreme than the true position. It is best for the groups in conflict to look for an identity they can share. Conflict-resolution efforts might begin by emphasizing the common goal of reaching a fair and equitable agreement. Assume that the marketing group in a credit-card company thinks that the credit-evaluation group is using algorithms that reject too many creditworthy applicants. During the first conflict-resolution session, the head of the marketing group might emphasize that both groups should share the goal of wanting the credit-card company to increase revenue and prosper.

7. *Decide on the most appropriate medium for dealing with the conflict.* The traditional way of resolving conflict is an in-person discussion. Yet other media are possible, such as telephone calls, videoconferences, e-mail, text messaging, chat, and intranet. Resolving conflict outside the office, such as at a restaurant, is another possibility. The more serious and complex the conflict, the more that in-person meetings are advised, such as settling trade disputes between countries. Whatever medium is chosen to resolve the dispute, it is important to have a meaningful discussion rather than a quick exchange of complaints.

Conflict resolution is only complete when the parties find an acceptable way forward.

8. *Make effective use of nonverbal communication skills.* A good deal of information exchanged during conflicts and disputes is communicated nonverbally. Paying attention to the other side's nonverbal signals, such as rate of breathing and movements or posture, might help you figure out what the person really wants or dislikes. For example, suddenly sitting up straight accompanied by a smile might indicate agreement with your proposal. Nonverbal signals are also useful in calming down the other side during a heated exchange. Among the most effective of these signals are a calm tone of voice, a friendly hand wave, and a smile.

9. *Separate sacred from pseudo-sacred issues.* Conflict resolution can be intractable when core values that negotiators or others in conflict believe are sacred, or nonnegotiable, are involved. Sacred issues include religious attitudes, belief in the profit motive, or prohibitions against smoking or drinking alcoholic beverages at an in-house company party. At times, a sacred attitude might only be sacred under certain conditions. For example, a CEO might ease up on the demand that a new product or service earn a profit within the first year if he or he were assured that profits would be forthcoming within two years.

10. *Create an opening for communication so that all parties involved have a voice.* Whether the conflict is being approached in person or digitally, all the players in the conflict should have the opportunity to provide input about the problem. The parties involved should have the opportunity to express their understanding and feelings about the situation. At a telecommunicates company, the head of customer support decided that field technicians should communicate with central staff only through texting. Considerable conflict arose because many technical problems are more readily resolved through spoken conversations than via texting. A few field supervisors along with a few technicians were given the opportunity to express their concerns fully. A compromise was then reached about which types of problems were better suited for resolution by text messages alone versus phone conversations.

11. *Repeat back (paraphrase) your understanding of the issues.* A key component of active listening is to restate or paraphrase what you think you heard the other side say on key issues. In this way, the other side is likely to feel that you understand, and you have also demonstrated empathy. Many conflicts continue to fester because one or both sides do not think the other side understands the problems that he or she is facing. Getting back to the conflict between the field technicians (a.k.a. electronics repair workers), here are two examples of paraphrasing:

   ■ *Home office service manager to field technician supervisor:* "I understand that you find it difficult to adapt to exchanging some text messages about technical problems. You would prefer to resolve a lot of issues by speaking over the phone."

   ■ *Technician supervisor to home office service manager:* "I get it. The home office has found that you can save a lot of time in getting repairs done if the technicians attempt to resolve tough technical issues over the phone. You are trying to raise the productivity of the field technicians."

12. *Use "I" statements instead of "you" statements to clarify your position on the major issues.* "I" statements are a major contributor to conflict resolution. By framing your thoughts and reactions around yourself, you avoid placing blame on the other party or focusing on his or her emotions and reactions. This approach helps to stick to the facts around an issue. To illustrate, you might ask a subordinate, "Why were you late to this morning's client meeting? You know how important it was." A better

approach is to frame the statement around your own emotions and reactions surrounding the subordinate's tardiness. Using this approach, you might say, "I felt frustrated that I could not begin our client meeting at the scheduled time. I promised him that we would all meet this morning."

13. *Find the way forward.* Conflict resolution is only complete when the parties find an acceptable way forward. Carefully examine the options and decide jointly what to do next. Perhaps a comprise can be reached that is acceptable to both sides. If a compromise cannot be reached, figure out what can be done to prevent the conflict from escalating. Make sure that both sides understand their role in keeping the conflict resolved. Consider the recurring issues of whether to close a particular factory. A resolution might be reached that the factory can stay afloat for two more years, provided it is profitable. Factory personnel might be responsible for finding ways to cut costs by eliminating waste and not replacing all the workers who retire or quit voluntarily. For their role, corporate management will look for additional useful work for the factory, such as subcontracting some work from other companies and allocating any new work to the factory that fits its unique capabilities.

Summary

One five-step approach to conflict resolution is as follows: (1) Separate the people from the problem, and focus on the process; (2) identify a mediator; (3) clarify the problem; (4) explore all options; and (5) agree on a resolution.

The five traditional conflict-resolution styles are based on a combination of satisfying one's own concerns (assertiveness) and satisfying the concerns of others (cooperativeness). The styles are competitive, accommodative, sharing, collaborative, and avoidant. The collaborative style leads to win–win. The five styles have implications for other aspects of workplace behavior, such as the avoiding (including forcing) style being negatively related to organizational citizenship behavior among subordinates.

Techniques for resolving conflict include the following: confrontation and problem solving; win–lose conflict resolution; confront, contain, and connect for anger; and reframing through cognitive restructuring and asking questions. Five rules for dealing effectively with organizational conflict are (1) stay focused on the essential objectives, (2) do not fight over things that do not matter, (3) build empathy for other people's points of view, (4) adhere to the adage "keep your friends close and your enemies even closer," and (5) use humor to defuse difficult situations.

A few additional behaviors for resolving conflict are (1) recognize that all of us have biased perceptions of what is fair; (2) pause, breathe, and figure out the next steps; (3) look beneath the surface to identify deeper issues; (4) assign high priority to building a good relationship; (5) avoid escalating tensions with threats and provocative moves; (6) overcome an "us versus them" mentality; (7) decide on the most appropriate medium for dealing with the conflict; (8) make effective use of nonverbal communication skills; (9) separate sacred from pseudo-sacred issues; and (10) create an opening for communication so that all parties involved have a voice.

Key Terms and Phrases

Cognitive restructuring, p. 137
Confrontation and problem solving, p. 133

Win–win, p. 132

Discussion Questions and Activities

1. Explain which one of the techniques or approaches to conflict resolution presented in this chapter you think would be the most useful for you.
2. Given that so much has been researched and written about conflict resolution, why do so many conflicts go unresolved?
3. How might effective conflict-resolution skills of employees enhance company profits?

4. Suppose a team leader is accused of hostile-environment sexual harassment against several team members and is confronted by his manager about the problem. What possible collaborative solutions to this conflict could be reached?
5. Give an example of a couple of nonverbal signals a person can use to show the other side that he or she

is searching for a collaborative way to resolve the conflict.

6. Imagine that you are in conflict with your manager about your work attire being far too informal. What kind of statement could you make to help build a relationship with your manager in order to resolve this conflict?

7. How effective is the current president of the United States in resolving conflict? Provide some evidence for your answer.

8. Imagine that a food truck is given a permit to operate one block from a sit-down restaurant, and the restaurant experiences a decline in revenues. How might the restaurant owner go about resolving this conflict?

9. Think back to a hockey game you have watched that involved a fight between the players, or find a video of a hockey game that includes a fight. Why do you think the referee lets the players fight for a couple of minutes before intervening to stop the conflict?

10. Ask a person with at least a few years of work experience what he or she thinks is the best way of resolving workplace conflict. How well does the answer fit with the information in this chapter?

Skill-Building Exercise: Cognitive Restructuring for Reducing Conflict

The purpose of this exercise is to develop skill in reframing negative situations into positive ones through cognitive restructuring. Reframe each of the following negative statements in a positive way.

Negative: One of my clients, Sebastian, is really bugging me. He sends me far too many texts asking about his account or our services. Some of his texts are simply silly observations not directly related to his account.

Positive:

Negative: Mandy is so obsessed with sports that it is hurting my productivity. Where does it say in the employee handbook that I have to spend 30 minutes on Monday listening to Mandy's comments on her favorite team's weekend performance? Doesn't she know that I have a job to do and that I just don't care about her team?

Positive:

Negative: Our new CEO Baxter has developed a business strategy that I don't think will work. He thinks that if we get rid of all our low-price offerings, we will become a more upscale company. I think that if we follow Baxter's strategy, we will be out of business in two years. We are no longer the upscale company that Baxter thinks we are.

Positive:

Negative: You have just been demoted from project manager to project team member, and you have been transferred to a less prestigious project. The rationale offered to you is that you are too much of a team player and therefore not a good leader. You feel frustrated, and your ego is a little deflated.

Positive:

CASE PROBLEM 9A: Is Maxwell a Victim of Age Discrimination?

Maxwell, age 56, has worked for an automotive parts manufacturer for 25 years in a variety of capacities. He current job title is senior business analyst, and he has also worked as a procurement specialist, a supply-chain technician, and a project manager during his time with the company. The only salary increases Maxwell has received in the last 10 years have been company-wide cost-of-living adjustments.

During his last two performance evaluations, Maxwell asked his immediate manager, Estella, why he has not been assigned a project manager role in five years. Estella said, "When we find a project manager assignment that we think fits you well, we will give you serious consideration. But as you know, Maxwell, project managers these days have to be on top of the new technology."

Maxwell responded that his computer and automotive technology skills were as up to date as those of most of the project managers in the company. Estella said that she would take his comments into consideration. She also added, however, that project managers must be highly creative in today's competitive environment. Maxwell replied, "Maybe I haven't invented a new battery or a way to reduce shipping costs by 50 percent, but I have good job creativity. Just ask my coworkers." Estella said she would make note of Maxwell's comments.

Maxwell remembers leaving that performance-evaluation session with the feeling that he was being discriminated against because of his age. He reflected, "I think that Estella was using the usual euphemistic

expressions to cover up for age discrimination. She said that a project manager needs to have the latest technology skills. That usually means a person must be under 35 to have good technology skills. Little does she know that most of the CEOs of Silicon Valley firms are around my age. Then she hits me with the stereotype that job creativity is a function of youth. Doesn't company leadership know that some of the most creative ideas in the automotive industry come from executives in their late 50s and early 60s?"

Maxwell went to the career section of the company's website to gather more insight into whether age discrimination existed, particularly for project managers and technical personnel. He came across a few terms in job descriptions that prompted him to think that age discrimination existed in subtle ways. When he found the term *digital native*, he recognized that nobody over 45 could really be a digital native because they acquired computer technology skills later in life.

In the same job description, Maxwell noted the term *high energy*, prompting Maxwell to think that somebody in the company assumes that younger people are more likely to have high energy. Maxwell noted that the company did not want to hire someone who was *overqualified* for a customer support position. It made him think that because experience is positively related to age, older applicants would be less likely to be hired.

At this point, Maxwell thought he was most likely being discriminated against based on his age. He pondered whether to look for a job outside the company or attempt to resolve any age discrimination problems that were holding him back in the company.

Case Questions

1. Based on the facts reported in this case, what is your opinion about whether Maxwell is a victim of age discrimination?
2. How should Maxwell attempt to resolve his conflict with the company in reference to the perceived age discrimination?
3. Which approach to conflict resolution might Maxwell use to deal with his problem yet still preserve a good relationship with the company?

Source: A few facts in this case are from Kate Rockwood, "More than a Number," *HR Magazine*, February 2018, pp. 24–31.

Associated Role Play

One student plays the role of Maxwell, who, after a weekend of heavy thought, decides that he is indeed a victim of age discrimination and wants to resolve the conflict. He sends Estella a text message requesting an interview to discuss the possibility that his age is holding him back from good assignments in the company. Another student plays the role of Estella, who agrees to meet with Maxwell but personally dislikes people considering themselves to be victims of any type of discrimination. Run the role play for about 10 minutes, with observers providing feedback about the effectiveness of the conflict-resolution session.

CASE PROBLEM 9B: Niki Wants Credit for Her Ideas

Niki is a member of a product development team at the pet food division of large food manufacturer. She is becoming increasingly concerned that her boss, Phil, regularly approves of her best ideas, yet takes ownership for them.

Niki explains what she sees as the problem: "After a couple of weeks of intensive research, I came up with the idea of a dog biscuit that contains tooth whitener. If a dog chews on these biscuits for at least a month, the dog will have cleaner, whiter teeth. I know that a lot of dog owners dislike dog teeth that are stained green or brown. Phil really liked my idea and said he would present it at our next product-development meeting.

"At the next product-development meeting, Phil said that *he* had this breakthrough idea for a dog biscuit that contains a veterinarian-approved tooth whitener. Next, he said that he wanted to thank the team for stimulating his thinking about this potential new product. I figured that maybe Phil was so excited about the tooth whitener that he forgot where he got the idea.

"Three weeks later, I approached Phil with an idea that fit our nonfood products. I suggested that we sell collars for dogs and cats that contain a computer chip with a built-in GPS. When the dog or cat strays too far from home, the chip will send a text message to the owner's smartphone. I knew that we would have to work with a computer scientist to get the idea from fantasy to reality, but Phil said the idea seemed promising.

"One week later, Phil sent out an e-mail to our team and his boss talking about the possibilities of a pet collar with a built-in chip to help the owner locate the pet when it strays. Phil did not even mention my name."

Niki now feels that Phil has gone too far in not giving her credit for her ideas. She is so angry that

she wants to scream at Phil, but she thinks to herself, "I want credit for my ideas so that I can advance my career. But if I trigger a rotten relationship with Phil, that could damage my career. I have to figure out what to do next."

Case Questions

1. How justified is Niki in wanting to receive credit for her ideas from Phil? Or is she just being a poor team player?
2. Recommend an approach Niki might use to resolve her conflict with Phil, yet not trigger an adverse relationship with him.

Associated Role Play

One student plays the role of Niki, who has now become intensely stressed that Phil has taken credit for a couple of her best recent ideas. The student writes a text message (displayed to the class) about her concerns. Another person plays the role of Phil, who receives the text message. He believes that a manager or team leader stimulates the thinking of team members, so he is partially responsible for any ideas developed in the group. Phil responds back to Niki. The role players engage in at least three text messages each, all displayed to the rest of the class, if technology permits. Feedback is welcome on the effectiveness of the attempt at conflict resolution.

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