

# Constructive Conflict Management

## ***Introduction***

By definition, *conflict* occurs when two or more people believe that they have incompatibilities. Most people will experience conflict at some point in their lives. Whether it is a simple disagreement between two individuals, or it involves several group members arguing over who is going to be in charge, conflict causes all parties to feel frustrated and may stir up some pretty strong emotions.

When a conflict is inevitable people often choose to avoid it, settle it quickly, or dilute the problem. Regardless of how positive the outcome may seem to appear, at least some of the participants will inevitably be left with negative feelings. Not all conflict is bad, in fact it might help to get your team energized, motivate them to find alternative solutions, or assist them with clarifying their viewpoints and perspectives.

In order to fully understand how to manage conflicts effectively, you must first be aware of all of the steps involved in the conflict process.

## ***The Conflict Process***

Conflict occurs in repeated behavior patterns referred to as *cycles*. Each time a conflict arises, it is considered an *episode*. A conflict cycle consists of many episodes occurring in a reiterated pattern. It is important to understand all of the stages that exist in the conflict process which will help you to identify problems as they arise in your personal and professional relationships. Below are the six stages of the conflict process, adopted from the conflict model outlined by Dr. Rex Mitchell in his article, *Constructive Management of Conflict in Groups*.

- **Stage 1 – Entering State**

This stage refers to a person's individual experiences, personality type, conflict history, behavioral traits, social pressures, and current state of mind. A person's conflict history, both with personal relationships and professional colleagues or partners, significantly impacts their entering state.

- Stage 2 – Initiating Event

The second stage begins when a conflict-initiating event occurs. An event can be anything from a companywide announcement that working hours will be extended by 30 minutes, to an employee/manager annual review meeting.

- Stage 3 – Frustration Begins

The combination of the person's entering state and the initiating event from the first two stages will dictate an individual's level of frustration. Frustration can emerge as a result of feeling left out, punished, overlooked, unworthy, or overworked. As frustration sets in, the conflict will begin to take shape.

- Stage 4 – Conceptualization Forms

During the fourth stage, the person builds a case in support of why he or she feels frustrated. An individual's conceptualization of an issue will often look vastly different from the perspectives of the other parties involved. A person's predisposed attitudes, behaviors, and experiences play a significant role in determining how they will respond.

- Stage 5 – Behavior Surfaces

Next, a person behaves in accordance with their conceptualized stance. Interactions with the other party cause follow-up behavior that can either escalate or diminish the level of conflict.

- Stage 6 – Outcome is Shaped

Outcomes will become increasingly evident as people state their feelings, share their decisions, and work towards new agreements. Outcomes can either be positive or negative, or a combination of both.

## **Conflict Styles**

Different personality types rely on a variety of approaches to conflict resolution. Research has identified the following five different conflict styles that are most commonly exhibited:

1. **Avoidance** – The avoidance conflict style is exhibited by people who wish to ignore issues or bypass them altogether. These individuals usually have little

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concern for their own personal needs and tend to disregard the needs and concerns of others as well.

2. **Accommodating** – The accommodating conflict style is exhibited by individuals who disregard their own needs while placing a high value on the wants and needs of others. Accommodators tend to get satisfaction from satisfying another person's needs.
3. **Aggressive** – The aggressive conflict style is exhibited when an individual only focuses on their own personal needs. People using this conflict style prefer to seek control over others and use intimidation in order to force others into agreeing with their point of view.
4. **Cooperation** – The cooperation conflict style is exhibited by individuals who seek to balance the needs of others with their own personal needs. These people are highly collaborative and willing to work with others to find a mutually agreed upon solution.
5. **Compromising** – The compromising conflict style is exhibited by individuals who are concerned with both fairness and equality. This style is a combination of both the accommodating and cooperation conflict styles.

These different forms of conflict response emphasize either self-interest or the interest of others. Each style is determined by a person's past conflict experiences, personality style, and social patterns as seen in other aspects of their life. You need to be able to recognize all of these patterns so that you can effectively respond to conflict.

## **Summary**

- Conflict exists when two people believe they have incompatibilities.
- Conflict is a continuous cycle that occurs in segmented episodes.
- There are six stages in the conflict process:
  1. Entering State
  2. Initiating Event
  3. Frustration Begins
  4. Conceptualization Occurs

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5. Behavior Surfaces
  6. Outcome is Shaped
- There are five different conflict styles that are most commonly exhibited. They include:
    1. Avoidance
    2. Accommodating
    3. Aggressive
    4. Cooperation
    5. Compromising

### **References**

Mitchell, Rex. 2002. *Constructive Management of Conflict in Groups*. Retrieved from [http://www.csun.edu/~hfmgt001/cm\\_gp.htm](http://www.csun.edu/~hfmgt001/cm_gp.htm)