

The following material is study material that is provided so that you can review for use in the learning exercises that follow. You are also responsible for using outside sources to work through the exercises.

I. A Definition of Conflict

A. There has been no shortage of definitions of conflict, but common to most is the idea that conflict is a perception.

1. If no one is aware of a conflict, then it is generally agreed no conflict exists.
 - a. Also needed to begin the conflict process are opposition or incompatibility and interaction.

B. We define conflict as a process that begins when one party perceives that another party has negatively affected, or is about to negatively affect, something that the first party cares about.

1. This describes that point when an interaction “crosses over” to become an inter-party conflict.
2. It encompasses the wide range of conflicts that people experience in organizations.
3. There is no consensus over the role of conflict in groups and organizations.
4. In the past, researchers tended to argue about whether conflict was uniformly good or bad. Such simplistic views eventually gave way to approaches recognizing that not all conflicts are the same and that different types of conflict have different effects.
5. Contemporary perspectives differentiate types of conflict based on their effects.
 - a. Functional conflict supports the goals of the group and improves its performance.
 - b. Conflicts that hinder group performance are dysfunctional or destructive forms of conflict.

II. Types of Conflict

A. Types of Conflict

1. Researchers have classified conflicts into three categories: task, relationship, or process.
 - a. Task conflict relates to the content and goals of the work.
 - b. Relationship conflict focuses on interpersonal relationships.
 - c. Process conflict is about how the work gets done.
2. Studies demonstrate that relationship conflicts, at least in work settings, are almost always dysfunctional (though it may improve creativity under some circumstances).
 - a. Why? It appears that the friction and interpersonal hostilities inherent in relationship conflicts increase personality clashes and decrease mutual understanding, which hinders the completion of organizational tasks.
3. Of the three types, relationship conflicts also appear to be the most psychologically exhausting to individuals.

4. This type of conflict can also be very problematic for employees who are new to the organization, since newcomers rely on coworkers to learn information about the job.

5. While scholars agree that relationship conflict is dysfunctional, there is considerably less agreement as to whether task and process conflicts are functional.

a. Early research suggested that task conflict within groups was associated with higher group performance, but a recent review of 116 studies found that task conflict was essentially unrelated to group performance.

b. However, there were factors that could create a relationship between conflict and performance.

c. One such factor was whether the conflict included top management or occurred lower in the organization.

d. Task conflict among top management teams was positively associated with their performance, whereas conflict lower in the organization was negatively associated with group performance.

e. This review also found that it mattered whether other types of conflict were occurring at the same time.

f. If task and relationship conflict occurred together, task conflict was more likely negative, whereas if task conflict occurred by itself, it more likely was positive.

6. Finally, some scholars have argued that the strength of conflict is important—if task conflict is very low, people aren't really engaged or addressing the important issues. a. If task conflict is too high, however, infighting will quickly degenerate into personality conflict.

b. According to this view, moderate levels of task conflict are optimal.

i. Supporting this argument, one study in China found that moderate levels of task conflict in the early development stage increased creativity in groups, but high levels decreased team performance.

7. Finally, the personalities of the teams appear to matter.

a. A recent study demonstrated that teams made up of individuals who are, on average, high in openness and emotional stability are better able to turn task conflict into increased group performance.

b. The reason may be that open and emotionally stable teams can put task conflict in perspective and focus on how the variance in ideas can help solve the problem, rather than letting it degenerate into relationship conflicts.

8. What about process conflict? Researchers found that process conflicts revolve around delegation and roles. Conflicts over delegation often revolve around shirking, and conflicts over roles can leave some group members feeling marginalized.

9. Thus, process conflicts often become highly personalized and quickly devolve into relationship conflicts.

a. It's also true, of course, that arguing about how to do something takes time away from actually doing it. We're all been part of groups in which the arguments and debates about roles and responsibilities seem to go nowhere.

B. Loci of Conflict

1. Another way to understand conflict is to consider its locus, or where the conflict occurs.
2. Here, too, there are three basic types:
 - a. Dyadic conflict is conflict between two people.
 - b. Intragroup conflict occurs within a group or team.
 - c. Intergroup conflict is conflict between groups or teams.
3. Nearly all the literature on task relationship and process conflict considers intragroup conflict (within the group).
4. That makes sense given that groups and teams often exist only to perform a particular task. However, it doesn't necessarily tell us about the other loci of conflict.
5. Another intriguing question about loci is whether conflicts interact or buffer one another.
 - a. Intense intergroup conflict can be quite stressful to group members and might well affect the way they interact.
6. Thus, understanding functional and dysfunctional conflict requires not only that we identify the type of conflict; we also need to know where it occurs.
7. It's possible that while the concepts of task, relationship, and process conflict are useful in understanding intragroup or even dyadic conflict, they are less useful in explaining the effects of intergroup conflict.

III. The Conflict Process

A. Introduction

1. The conflict process has five stages: potential opposition or incompatibility, cognition and personalization, intentions, behavior, and outcomes.

B. Stage I: Potential Opposition or Incompatibility

1. Communication

a. Communication as a source of conflict represents those opposing forces that arise from semantic difficulties,

misunderstandings, and "noise" in the communication channels.

b. Differing word connotations, jargon, insufficient exchange of information, and noise in the communication channel are all

barriers to communication and potential antecedents to conflict.

c. The potential for conflict increases when either too little or too much communication takes place.

d. Communication is functional up to a point, after which it is possible to over communicate, increasing the potential for conflict.

2. Structure

a. The term structure includes variables such as size, degree of specialization, jurisdictional clarity, member-goal compatibility, leadership styles, reward systems, and the degree of dependence.

b. Size and specialization act as forces to stimulate conflict.

i. The larger the group and more specialized its activities, the greater the likelihood of conflict.

ii. The potential for conflict is greatest where group members are younger and turnover is high.

3. Personal variables—include personality, emotions, and values.

a. People high in the personality traits of disagreeableness, neuroticism, or self-monitoring are prone to tangle with other people more often, and to react poorly when conflicts occur.

b. Emotions can also cause conflict even when they are not directed at others.

C. Stage

II: Cognition and Personalization

1. Antecedent conditions lead to conflict only when the parties are affected by and aware of it.

2. However, because a disagreement is a perceived conflict does not mean it is personalized.

3. Conflict is personalized when it is felt and when individuals become emotionally involved.

4. This stage is where conflict issues tend to be defined and this definition delineates the possible settlements.

5. Second, emotions play a major role in shaping perceptions.

6. Negative emotions produce oversimplification of issues, reductions in trust, and negative interpretations of the other party's behavior.

7. Positive feelings increase the tendency to see potential relationships among the elements of a problem, to take a broader view of the situation, and to develop more innovative solutions.

D. Stage III: Intentions

1. Intentions are decisions to act in a given way.

a. Why are intentions separated out as a distinct stage? Merely one party attributing the wrong intentions to the other escalates a lot of conflicts.

b. One author's effort to identify the primary conflict-handling intentions is along two dimensions:

i. Cooperativeness—the degree to which one party attempts to satisfy the other party’s concerns.

ii. Assertiveness—the degree to which one party attempts to satisfy his or her own concerns.

2. Five conflict-handling intentions can be identified: competing, collaborating, avoiding, accommodating, and compromising.

a. Competing

i. When one person seeks to satisfy his or her own interests, regardless of the impact on the other parties to the conflict.

b. Collaborating

i. When the parties to conflict each desire to fully satisfy the concerns of all parties. The intention is to solve the problem by clarifying differences rather than by accommodating.

c. Avoiding

i. A person may recognize that a conflict exists and want to withdraw from or suppress it.

d. Accommodating

i. When one party seeks to appease an opponent, that party is willing to be self-sacrificing.

e. Compromising

i. When each party to the conflict seeks to give up something, sharing occurs, resulting in a compromised outcome. There is no clear winner or loser, and the solution provides incomplete satisfaction of both parties’ concerns.

E. Stage IV: Behavior

1. Stage IV is where conflicts become visible. The behavior stage includes the statements, actions, and reactions made by the conflicting parties. These conflict behaviors are usually overt attempts to implement each party’s intentions.

2. Stage IV is a dynamic process of interaction; conflicts exist somewhere along a continuum.

3. At the lower part of the continuum, conflicts are characterized by subtle, indirect, and highly controlled forms of tension.

4. Conflict intensities escalate as they move upward along the continuum until they become highly destructive.

a. Collaboration may be especially effective for tasks that require innovation, but can lead to mistrust and conflict when groups

are splintered into smaller groups of two or three based on task. Individuals who have been assigned power tend to have a

more difficult time using collaborative strategies.

5. If a conflict is dysfunctional, what can the parties do to de-escalate it? Or, conversely, what options exist if conflict is too low and needs to be increased?

- a. This brings us to techniques of conflict management.
- b. The major resolution and stimulation techniques that allow managers to control conflict levels.
- c. We have already described several as conflict-handling intentions.
- d. Under ideal conditions, a person's intentions should translate into comparable behaviors.

F. Stage V: Outcomes

1. Outcomes may be functional—improving group performance, or dysfunctional in hindering it.

2. Functional outcomesa. How might conflict act as a force to increase group performance?

i. Conflict is constructive when it:

- (a) Improves the quality of decisions.
- (b) Stimulates creativity and innovation.
- (c) Encourages interest and curiosity.
- (d) Provides the medium through which problems can be aired and tensions released.
- (e) Fosters an environment of self-evaluation and change.

3. Dysfunctional outcomes

a. The destructive consequences of conflict on the performance of a group or an organization are generally well known.

i. Uncontrolled opposition breeds discontent, which acts to dissolve common ties and eventually leads to the destruction of the group.

b. A substantial body of literature documents how dysfunctional conflicts can reduce group effectiveness.

i. Among the more undesirable consequences are hampered communication, reductions in group cohesiveness, and subordination of group goals to the primacy of infighting among members.

ii. All forms of conflict—even the functional varieties—appear to reduce group member satisfaction and reduce trust.

iii. When active discussions turn into open conflicts between members, information sharing between members has been shown to decrease significantly.

iv. At the extreme, conflict can bring group functioning to a halt and threaten the group's survival.

4. Managing functional conflict

a. If managers recognize that in some situations conflict can be beneficial, what can they do to manage conflict effectively in their organizations?

i. One of the keys to minimizing counterproductive conflicts is recognizing when there really is a disagreement.

ii. Many apparent conflicts are due to people using different language to discuss the same general course of action.

(a) For example, someone in marketing might focus on “distribution problems,” while someone from operations will talk about “supply chain management” to describe essentially the same issue.

iii. Successful conflict management recognizes these different approaches and attempts to resolve them by encouraging open, frank discussion focused on interests rather than issues (we’ll have more to say about this when we contrast distributive and integrative bargaining styles).

iv. Another approach is to have opposing groups pick parts of the solution that are most important to them and then focus on how each side can get its top needs satisfied.

v. Neither side may get exactly what it wants, but both sides will get the most important parts of its agenda.

b. Groups that resolve conflicts successfully discuss differences of opinion openly and are prepared to manage conflict when it arises.

i. The most disruptive conflicts are those that are never addressed directly. An open discussion makes it much easier to develop

a shared perception of the problems at hand; it also allows groups to work toward a mutually acceptable solution.

ii. Managers need to emphasize shared interests in resolving conflicts, so groups that disagree with one another don’t become too entrenched in their points of view and start to take the conflicts personally.

iii. Groups with cooperative conflict styles and a strong underlying identification to the overall group goals are more effective

than groups with a more competitive style.

c. Differences across countries in conflict resolution strategies may be based on collectivistic tendencies and motives.

i. Collectivist cultures see people as deeply embedded in social situations, whereas individualist cultures see them as

autonomous.

ii. As a result, collectivists are more likely to seek to preserve relationships and promote the good of the group as a whole.

iii. They will avoid direct expression of conflicts, preferring indirect methods for resolving differences of opinion.

iv. Collectivists may also be more interested in demonstrations of concern and working through third parties to resolve disputes, whereas individualists will be more likely to confront differences of opinion directly and openly.

v. Some research does support this theory. Compared to collectivist Japanese negotiators, their more individualist U.S. counterparts are more likely to see offers from their counterparts as unfair and to reject them.

vi. Another study revealed that whereas U.S. managers were more likely to use competing tactics in the face of conflicts, compromising and avoiding are the most preferred methods of conflict management in China.

vii. Interview data, however, suggests top management teams in Chinese high-technology firms prefer collaboration even more than compromising and avoiding.

Source: Robbins, S. & Judge, T. (2019). *Organizational Behavior*, 18th Edition. Boston, MA: Pearson Education.