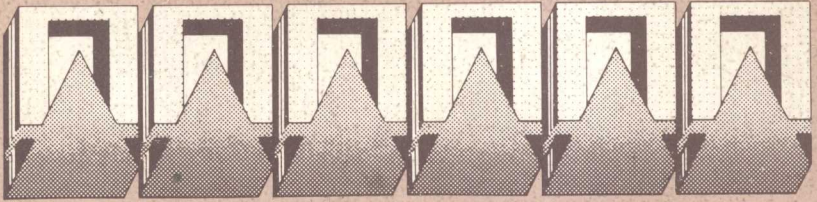


# Interpersonal Conflict Resolution



Alan C. Filley

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University of Wisconsin, Madison

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*For those, like Florence,  
who listen.*

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# Foreword

The Management Applications Series is concerned with the application of contemporary research, theory, and techniques. There are many excellent books at advanced levels of knowledge, but there are few which address themselves to the application of such knowledge. The authors in this series are uniquely qualified for this purpose, since they are all scholars who have experience in implementing change in real organizations through the methods they write about.

Each book treats a single topic in depth. Where the choice is between presenting many approaches briefly or a single approach thoroughly, we have opted for the latter. Thus, after reading the book, the student or practitioner should know how to apply the methodology described.

Selection of topics for the series was guided by contemporary relevance to management practice, and by the availability of an author qualified as an expert, yet able to write at a basic level of understanding. No attempt is made to cover all management methods, nor is any sequence implied in the series, although the books do complement one another. For example, change methods might fit well with managing by objectives.

The books in this series may be used in several ways. They may be used to supplement textbooks in basic courses on management, organizational behavior, personnel, or industrial psychology/sociology. Students appreciate the fact that the material is immediately applicable. Practicing managers will want to use individual books to increase their skills, either through self study or in connection with management development programs, inside or outside the organization.

Alan C. Filley

# Preface

The opposite of conflict is problem solving. Conflict generally ends in loss; problem solving, on the other hand, ends in the satisfactory achievement of the needs of the involved parties. If this book is successful, readers will learn how to engage in problem solving and how to change conflict situations into problem-solving situations.

Two values associated with problem solving are that it can result in objectively superior decisions to those resulting from typical conflict methods and that it can make the involved parties feel like winners. Without making any moral judgments, people who feel like winners will have more energy, creativity, and measured intelligence than the same people who feel like losers.

Eric Berne has said, "We are all born princes and princesses, and our parents turn us into frogs." If this book is successful, readers will know why this is true and, perhaps, will be in a position to help turn frogs back into princes and princesses.

No specific educational background or technical knowledge is necessary to understand this book, though material is drawn from current research and theory on conflict resolution in the behavioral sciences. Chapters 1 and 2 analyze the conflict process and the various ways in which conflicts can be resolved. Next, Chapters 3-6 explain the effects of language, personal behavior, attitudes, and organization on the achievement of different interpersonal outcomes. Chapters 7 and 8 describe the Integrative Decision Making method of problem solving in detail. Finally, Chapter 9 discusses the conditions associated with changes in personal behavior so as to stimulate the use of and success with problem-solving methods.

A series of exercises demonstrating issues and behaviors discussed in the text is included in the appendix; appropriate exercises are referred to the reader's attention at the end of most chapters. While in one sense the book may be read without the use of the exercises, maximum learning can only be achieved through their use. This book is in some sense a manual for people who are working in groups.

The Integrative Decision Method described in detail in Chapters 7 and 8 has been used in a variety of organizations including private businesses, government agencies, labor unions, families, and universities. The focus of application is upon conflicts or problem solving between individuals or small groups. International conflicts or difficulties between broad social groups are not included. The book can show you how to solve disagreements with your spouse, business partner, or subordinate; it cannot tell you how to solve the tension in the Middle East.

As will be evident, a number of people and ideas have shaped the content of this book. In particular, I have benefited from the work of Norman R. F. Maier at the University of Michigan; I have never met him but have gained immensely from his research, insights, and excellent exercises. Others who have contributed in some way are Milan Mockovak, Larry Cummings, Florence Filley, Robert House, R. Shukla, and Megan Partch.

Alan C. Filley

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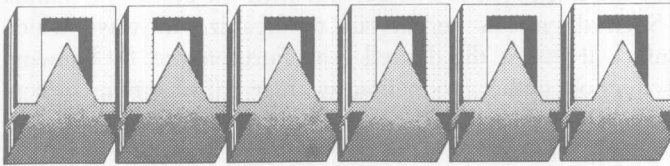
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# Types and Sources of Conflict

1



As humans we live our lives within a web of social relationships, most of which seem almost mechanical in their predictability and smoothness of function. We seek, establish, and maintain predictable patterns in our lives to avoid the anxiety of the unpredictable; such patterns, once established, require little conscious choice as they operate. We have predictable patterns for interacting with our family, for going to work in the morning, for performing in a job, for shopping at the market, and for socializing with others. Yet, because we are not solely mechanical, because we are social creatures in a social system, these patterns are not absolutely predictable.

We must also reckon with the elements of chance. While we can predict the movement of the solar system with relative certainty, we can only speak of the likelihood or probability of driving to work or of greeting the guard at the entrance. An accident or illness may have occurred to alter our usual routines. Finally, as human animals, we introduce a third element into our social systems, that of freedom (Boulding, 1964). We are capable of planning, of holding in our minds some picture of the future, and of altering our usual patterns of behavior.

Within our various social relationships are some which involve real or perceived differences between two or more parties. Where the interests of the parties are mutually exclusive—that is, where the gain of one party's goal is at the cost of the other's, or where the parties have

different values—then the resulting social interaction between the parties contains fertile ground for conflict.

It is our freedom which allows us to learn about our own social systems. We are able (1) to discover those elements of our systems which increase the likelihood of conflict, (2) to develop contingency plans when chance occurrences create disruptions, and (3) to produce and to improve systems for resolving conflict which maximize the benefits and minimize the costs to the parties involved. In this first chapter we shall be concerned with those characteristics of a system which increase the likelihood of conflict and with the system of conflict production. Such discussion permits us to organize in ways which minimize conflict, if that is the desired goal. Furthermore, by knowing the natural system of conflict production, we may adjust actions or conditions before conflicts take place, rather than wait for conflicts to develop before taking action.

In later chapters we shall focus on the conflict resolution process. Either because it may not be useful to avoid conflicts or because conflict develops as an unanticipated outcome, the resolution of conflict becomes necessary. We shall examine the various systems of resolution and suggest how they may be applied.

## KINDS OF CONFLICT

Not all conflicts are of the same kind. Some, for example, follow definite rules and are not typically associated with angry feelings on the part of the parties, while others involve irrational behavior and the use of violent or disruptive acts by the parties. As a first step, therefore, we shall distinguish between conflicts which are *competitive* and those which are *disruptive*. In competitive situations there can be a victory for one party only at the cost of the opponent's total loss and the way in which the parties relate to each other is governed by a set of rules. The parties strive for goals which are mutually incompatible. The emphasis of each party is upon the event of winning, rather than upon the defeat or reduction of the opponent. The actions of each party are selected using criteria based on the probability of leading to successful outcomes, and the competition terminates when the result is obvious to both sides (Rapoport, 1960).

In the disruptive conflict, on the other hand, the parties do not follow a mutually acceptable set of rules and are not primarily concerned with winning. Instead, they are intent upon reducing, defeating,

harming, or driving away the opponent. The means used are expedient, and the atmosphere is one of stress, anger, or fear. In extreme cases, the parties in disruptive conflict will abandon rational behavior and behave in any manner necessary to bring about the desired outcome, the goal of defeat.

Experience tells us that conflicts are usually distributed along a continuum between those that are competitive and those that are disruptive. Anger arises in a game and causes disruption. A competitor changes his behavior from a rational pursuit of a strategy of winning to an irrational act of aggression. Thus, the motives of the parties and the degree of strategic control which each exhibits are important factors in determining the degree to which a conflict is competitive or disruptive.

For a further elaboration of the kinds of conflict, we may describe the interaction between the parties according to (1) their mutuality of interests and (2) their perception of resource availability. As seen in Table 1-1, when parties seek real or perceived scarce resources (for example, victory or a share of a fixed sum) and when they have a mutuality of interests, the relationship is one of competition. When they seek real or perceived scarce resources and have unlike interests, their relationship is likely to be characterized by fighting and disruption. When the parties seek abundant resources but have dissimilar interests, their interaction will contain disagreement. Finally, when the parties seek abundant resources and have similar interests, they will most probably resort to problem solving.

Competition, disruption, and disagreement all imply a win-lose outcome (or at least some degree of winning or losing by each of the parties). Problem solving, on the other hand, implies the development of an outcome which provides acceptable gain to both parties. Thus, if the focus of competition changes from a win-lose game to a situation involving enhancement of skill or knowledge by the parties, it becomes problem solving since the parties are now, in effect, asking each other, "How can we interact in a manner which increases the benefit to both of us?" Likewise, if opposing parties in a fight realize the mutuality of their interests and the existence of abundant resources or if debaters

TABLE 1-1. Elements of Conflict.

	<i>Like interests</i>	<i>Unlike interests</i>
<i>Seek scarce resources</i>	Competition/games	Fights/disruption
<i>Seek abundant resources</i>	Problem solving	Disagreement/debate

change their emphasis from argument to the achievement of a correct solution, then their interactions will also shift to a problem-solving mode.

The point in this classification scheme is that conflict has been defined in terms of incompatible goals and different values, but that such differences are frequently *perceived rather than real*. If opposing parties can change their perceptions of resources from scarce to abundant and can recognize the mutuality of their interests, it is often possible to change from a form of conflict to a form of problem solving.

We may summarize the characteristics of a conflict situation as follows:

- 1) At least two parties (individuals or groups) are involved in some kind of interaction.
- 2) Mutually exclusive goals and/or mutually exclusive values exist, in fact or as perceived by the parties involved.
- 3) Interaction is characterized by behavior designed to defeat, reduce, or suppress the opponent or to gain a mutually designated victory.
- 4) The parties face each other with mutually opposing actions and counteractions.
- 5) Each party attempts to create an imbalance or relatively favored position of power vis-à-vis the other.

### THE VALUES OF CONFLICT

Conflict, a social process which takes various forms and which has certain outcomes, itself is neither good nor bad. The conflict process merely leads to certain results, and the value of those results as favorable or unfavorable depends upon the measures used, the party making the judgment, and other subjective criteria. Let us consider some of the possible positive values of conflict:

#### *The diffusion of more serious conflict*

Competitive situations such as games provide conflict processes and outcomes which are governed by rules. These types of conflict seem to provide entertainment value and tension release to the parties. Winning and losing are identified as events and may have little effect on

the self-perception of any player. That is, to lose in a competitive event does not suggest that an individual is less important, has less status, or is less valued as a person. In addition, in competitive situations aggressive behavior can be channeled along socially acceptable lines.

Viewed another way, conflict processes which are institutionalized (that is, for which acceptable resolution procedures have been established) function as preventive measures against more destructive outcomes. Grievance systems, for example, permit the step-by-step adjudication of differences to avoid major clashes between parties such as labor and management. Similarly, systems which provide for participation by the members of an organization in decision making, while they are positively associated with the number of disputes between parties, are negatively associated with the number of major incidents between them (Corwin, 1969). Thus, it might be accurate to say that intimacy between parties tends to result in disagreements which, in turn, reduce the likelihood of major fights and disruption.

### *The stimulation of a search for new facts or solutions*

As pointed out earlier, at least some aspects of our social systems are automatic and predictable. Where social systems are functioning mechanically, however, there is little likelihood of creativity or change. On the other hand, when parties are involved in a disagreement the process may lead to a clarification of facts, thus facilitating the resolution of conflict. For example, if a wife tells her husband, "You are not doing your share of the housework," and the husband replies, "Yes, I am," then little may be resolved. However, if the husband replies, "What statements or behavior of mine have led to your conclusion that I am not assuming enough responsibility at home?" then the interaction is changed from a conflict to a problem-solving situation based on clarification of facts.

In another way, conflict can stimulate the search for new methods or solutions. When parties are in conflict about which of two alternatives to accept, their disagreement may stimulate a search for another solution mutually acceptable to both. In like manner, when both parties view themselves as seeking to gain an adequate share of scarce resources, they may actually find that their needs or goals can be met simultaneously with the development of creative solutions which neither had previously considered.

As these situations suggest, conflict can create tension which is reduced through problem solving. The tension acts as a stimulus to

find new methods for its own reduction. This is the difference between *confrontation* and the way in which confrontation is resolved. The confrontations between labor and management, between students and college administrators, or between blacks and whites act as stimuli for change, stimuli which may lead to disruption or overt hostility or which may lead to new relationships between the parties and creative solutions to problems.

### *An increase in group cohesion and performance*

Conflictive situations between two or more groups are likely to increase both the cohesiveness and the performance of the groups, although we must be careful to distinguish between effects during the conflict and those after the winner and loser have been identified. During the conflict members of each group close ranks and are united in their efforts. Members' evaluations of their own group improve (Blake and Mouton, 1961c); and each group judges its own solution as best. The positions of opponents are evaluated negatively, and there is little effort to understand them. Questions asked opponents are designed to embarrass or to weaken them rather than to generate facts and understanding. Perceptions of the group's own position are distorted, as is recognition of areas of common agreement with the opposing group. Even when the adversary's position is thought to be well understood by members of one group, research has shown that a real understanding is blocked by identification with the position of one's own group. In these circumstances intergroup resolution of conflict increases in difficulty since groups are most likely unaware of the distortions in factual knowledge that exist between them (Blake and Mouton, 1961a).

During the competitive period, levels of work and cooperation within each group are high. When competing groups select representatives to deal with other groups, they choose task leaders (hard-driving individuals who keep their own group on course) rather than individuals skilled in social facilitation. During conflict such leaders exhibit high loyalty to their group and tend to conform to group expectations rather than to focus upon the assigned problem (Blake and Mouton, 1961b).

Such conditions appear to be desirable, for the most part, and probably account for the popular belief that competition is valuable as a stimulus to work groups. But what actually happens when one group is declared the victor and the other the vanquished? For one thing, the



leader of the winning group increases in status, while the leader of the losing group decreases in status. The leader in the losing group is blamed for the loss. The atmosphere in the groups also changes. The rate of tension, problem avoidance, fighting, and competitive feelings will increase in the losing group and decrease in the winning group. If the loss can be blamed on conditions beyond the control of the group, the result may be increased cohesion in the losing group (Lott and Lott, 1965). If the group does assume responsibility for the loss, it often analyzes the situation and prepares itself to fight better the next time. In contrast, the winning group merely says, "We did a good job. Let's knock off" (Blake and Mouton, 1961c, p. 432). Thus, heightened cooperation and effort by group members during the conflict may actually decrease once the conflict is resolved.

### *The measure of power or ability*

Conflict provides a readily available method of measurement. If the ground rules for victory or defeat are identifiable to both parties, then the winner of a game or sports event can be easily determined. Such literal interpretation has cognitive value. In addition, while not precisely measurable, the relative power between parties may be identified through conflictive situations. Coercion, control, and suppression require clear superiority of power of one party over another, whereas problem solving requires an equalization of power among the parties. Thus, a party wishing to avoid overt suppression of the opponent must take action to provide a favorable power balance; suppression of the opponent can be avoided by employing problem-solving methods which insure a balance of power.

From the preceding discussion it should be clear that conflict is a process which itself is neither good nor bad, but which has elements and outcomes which may be judged favorably or unfavorably by those participating in or evaluating it. We shall now turn to the conflict process itself.

## THE CONFLICT PROCESS

Conflict is defined in this book as a process which takes place between two or more parties.<sup>1</sup> By *parties* we may be referring to individ-

1. This section draws from the work of Pondy (1967, 1969); Corwin (1969); Walton and Dutton (1969); Fink (1968); and Schmidt (1973).