

# Use and Abuse of Conflict

# Workshop

**A**mber has a big problem with Frank in Purchasing at the construction firm where they work. Recently, Amber was asked to help prepare a bid for a new city recreation center. This is an unusual project for the firm, in part because the plans call for collaborating with a local artist on mosaic tile work. To figure out the cost of the special materials, she needs Frank's help.

Frank has been with the company about 125 years, Amber supposes. He's grumpy, set in his ways, and disrespectful of young people like her. This morning, when she showed him the specifications for the tiles, he grunted, "Can't get 'em."

"What do you mean?" she retorted. "I've listed three possible sources. All you have to do is ask for prices."

"We don't deal with those places," he declared. "Besides, these specs are too vague."

"I don't have details yet. We need a ballpark estimate, that's all. And why can't we deal with new suppliers?" she questioned.

Frank rolled his eyes and ignored her.

"Listen," she snapped, "I was told I had to work with you on these costs.

If you won't cooperate, I'm going to tell the boss you're just a—" (she swallowed several nasty words) "—a giant clog in the works," she concluded.

"Oh, you go ahead and do that," he grinned. "Meanwhile, Mr. Clog's gonna file these papers for you." And he tossed her carefully prepared specs into a wastebasket.

Since then, Amber has been fuming. Should she storm back and confront Frank? Should she inform the boss that she

can no longer work with Frank?

Should she tell her coworkers about the incident in the hope that everyone will shun him? While she weighs these options, she is too upset to get any work done.



## What's Inside

### *Here, you will learn to*

- ◆ define conflict
- ◆ identify beneficial aspects of conflict
- ◆ recognize when conflict is constructive

## What Is Conflict?

A conflict exists when one person's attempt to reach his or her goals interferes with another person's attempt to do the same. As Amber's story demonstrates, conflict can rear its head at almost any time in a work environment. It can build up over a long time, or it can flare suddenly. It may be based on genuine disagreements about the job, but it can be fueled by many other things: pressures that the individuals are feeling, frustrations, fears, personal dislikes, and more.

Amber's goal is to do her job well, and she sees her efforts being blocked by Frank, whose goal may be to prevent interference with his cherished way of doing things. As they begin to clash over goals, many negative emotions and behaviors come into play. Frank patronizes and dismisses Amber. She threatens him and calls him a name. Now the situation is getting out of hand.

Of course, conflict doesn't have to be so open or obvious. Perhaps the nastiest conflicts in organizations are the ones papered over by smiles and hearty greetings. If you feel that someone who pretends to like you is really stabbing you in the back, you're in conflict.



## Disagreement vs. Conflict

It's important to realize that mere disagreement is not conflict. Say that you advocate Plan A, and a coworker of yours advocates Plan B. At a meeting you both present your arguments; the two of you disagree strongly, maybe even loudly. This isn't necessarily conflict. It wouldn't be conflict unless one of you felt the other was blocking the achievement of a personal goal. If the dominant goal for both of you is reaching the best decision for the company, and you are both willing to accept that there are different opinions about how to proceed, you can continue to work together without conflict.



## Personality Traits That Promote Conflict

Are there some types of people who, by their very nature, rub others the wrong way? That is, do certain personality traits make people more prone to conflict? Psychologists and organization theorists generally believe this is true. Although such personality traits are hard to identify and measure, the following characteristics, among others, seem to promote conflict:

- ◆ Authoritarian attitudes
- ◆ Arrogance
- ◆ Insistence on the truth of a belief that cannot be proved
- ◆ Strong need to control things
- ◆ Fear of uncertainty

## Did you know?

According to a survey by Accountemps, managers in major U.S. corporations spend more than four weeks a year handling problems caused by employees who can't get along with one another.

## Consequences of Conflict

What are some of the consequences of conflict in the workplace? You can probably think of several immediately. People who study organizations have described many damages caused by conflict, including these:

- ◆ Energy is diverted from important organizational goals.
- ◆ Tasks that depend on cooperation don't get done properly.
- ◆ Both parties to the conflict feel increased stress and frustration, which in turn can affect their ability to do their job.
- ◆ The "losers" in a conflict often feel demeaned or not respected, and this can affect their commitment to the organization as a whole.
- ◆ Often the conflict spreads to other people, forcing them to choose sides and poisoning many relationships throughout the organization. Morale declines, suspicion and distrust mount, and job satisfaction suffers. Absenteeism rises.
- ◆ As hostilities escalate, some people may get fired. Others may quit because they can't stand the atmosphere. In either case, turnover increases, and the organization may struggle to keep a competent and productive staff.
- ◆ Clients or customers notice that something is wrong in the organization, and they begin to take their business elsewhere.

# ACTIVITY 1.1

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

## Looking at a Conflict of Your Own

Think about a conflict you've had within the last few years, either at work or in another part of your life. Answer the following questions:

1. How did it start?

2. What emotions became involved?

Your emotions:

The other person's emotions (as you understand them):

3. Did the conflict escalate to involve other people? How and why?

4. List any negative consequences that resulted:

5. Looking back, do you think you should have handled the conflict differently? Explain your answer.

## Is Conflict Always Bad?

Obviously conflict is often harmful, both for the people involved and for the organization where they work. Even the “winner” of a conflict may suffer from all the stress and hostility aroused. But does conflict always have to be bad?

Let’s look at some ways in which conflict—if handled properly—may actually benefit an organization.

### Conflict and the Balancing of Goals

As you’ve seen, conflict involves competing goals, but isn’t it natural in any organization that goals compete with one another?

Imagine that a research director for a software firm wants to spend money to develop new products. The corporation’s controller, meanwhile, wants to hold down costs. These goals often contradict each other, and this can lead to conflict between the two people. But to us, looking in from outside, it’s clear that both goals are good. The company should try to develop new software, and at the same time it should exercise some control over spending.

Clearly, in a case like this, the company needs to find a balance between the opposing goals. If some degree of conflict between the research manager and controller helps the company find the right balance, then the conflict, in that sense, is useful.

## Conflict and Creativity

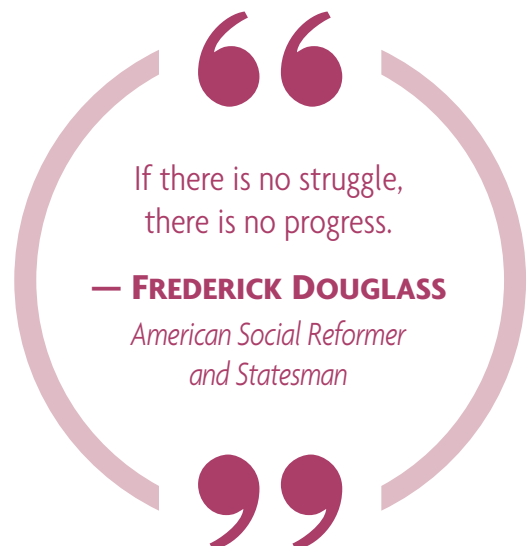
Good decision making also demands creativity—the ability to come up with new solutions. Conflict, if it’s not too hostile, often stimulates creativity.

In other words, conflict can make the competing individuals, and those around them, think harder

and more inventively.

It tends to increase both the number of ideas considered and the originality of those ideas. In our example of conflict in the software firm, the research director may think of innovative ways to design and test new products without spending so much money. Meanwhile,

the controller may be inspired by the conflict to find more ways to stretch the budget.



— **FREDERICK DOUGLASS**

*American Social Reformer  
and Statesman*

## Other benefits of conflict

Besides its impact on goals and creativity, there are other potential benefits of conflict:

- ◆ **Focusing of attention.** Conflicts help direct employees' attention to problems that need to be solved.
- ◆ **Stimulation of internal change.** Conflict can spur the organization to modify outdated or unproductive procedures.
- ◆ **Personal growth.** People involved in the conflict may learn new things—about work, about life, about relationships—that they can apply in the future. Their perspectives may be improved, their horizons widened.
- ◆ **Greater understanding of other employees.** Conflict may help people learn what others in the organization truly care about.
- ◆ **Excitement.** After all, wouldn't a job—and life in general—be boring without some conflict?
- ◆ **Greater energy and initiative.** Excited workers often become more productive.

If necessity is the mother of invention, conflict is its father.

— **KENNETH KAYE**

*Author of Workplace Wars and How to End Them*

One further benefit of conflict deserves mention. You've often heard of the problems caused by holding your feelings in. Strong negative emotions, especially, can fester if you suppress them. Conflict gives you a chance to vent those feelings—to clear the air.

Of course, if you want to make things better rather than worse, you have to vent your feelings in the right way. Calling someone a pigheaded jerk is not usually productive. You'll read more about venting emotions in Workshop 5.

## ? Did you know?

In studies of conflict in classrooms, psychologist David Johnson and educator Roger Johnson discovered that being part of a controversy helped students do the following:

- ◆ Generate more and better ideas
- ◆ Remember more correct information
- ◆ Improve the originality of their thinking
- ◆ Use more varied problem-solving strategies
- ◆ Find more novel and creative solutions
- ◆ Generalize what they learned to other situations

## ACTIVITY 1.2

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

### Assessing Your Own Approach to Conflict

Answer these questions as honestly as you can, using the following scale:

- 5 Very true of me
- 4 Often true of me
- 3 Occasionally true of me
- 2 Seldom true of me
- 1 Never true of me

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. When people disagree with me, I have a hard time understanding why they are so illogical.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. I don't necessarily expect other people to agree with my position; I just want them to give my ideas their due weight.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. With some people, I take their disapproval as a sign that I must be right.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. In an argument, I try hard to understand the different points of view.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. When people argue with me, I have trouble expressing myself without getting angry.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. When I agree to a solution, I take responsibility for making it work and expect the others involved to do the same.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. In my type of work, I don't see a middle ground; what's right is right.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. In resolving a conflict, I try to find a solution that both my opponent and I can feel good about.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. I call a spade a spade, and a fool a fool.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. Once a conflict is over, my opponent and I get along fine with each other.

To discover your total score for this exercise, first reverse the scores for the odd-numbered items. That is, if you wrote a 5 next to the first item, make it a 1; if you wrote a 4, make it a 2. (A 3 stays the same.) Now add up all the numbers. The maximum score is 50. The closer you are to 50, the more likely you are to handle conflicts in a beneficial manner. Whatever your score, however, this workbook should help you improve your understanding of conflicts and the way you deal with them.

\_\_\_\_\_ **SCORE**

## Constructive vs. Destructive Conflict

Beneficial conflicts are often called *constructive*, and harmful conflicts are said to be *destructive*. These terms help us focus on a basic difference: good conflicts *build up* the organization's strengths, while bad conflicts *tear things down*. But what conditions make a conflict constructive rather than destructive?

Most experts agree that a conflict is likely to be constructive if:

- ◆ The problem is seen as a mutual problem. In other words, neither party says, "I'm okay, *you're* the one with a problem."
- ◆ The parties pursue a "win-win" outcome, in which both parties gain, rather than a "win-lose" strategy in which one person has to lose in order for the other to win.

- ◆ Both people express their ideas openly and communicate effectively.
- ◆ Each person takes the other seriously and treats him or her with respect.
- ◆ Both people feel they have been understood and accepted.
- ◆ Both people feel they have influenced the outcome.
- ◆ Both people are committed to the agreement they finally reach.
- ◆ Relationships among the parties are strengthened by the process of finding a solution.

Turn each of those characteristics into its opposite and you have a portrait of destructive conflict that can rip an organization apart.

## Is This Conflict Real?

Sometimes a conflict occurs for no genuine reason. Two people think they are opposed, and each feels the other is thwarting the accomplishment of an important goal. But in fact they've misunderstood each other. Their goals aren't as different as they suppose, and the conflict arose merely because of problems in perception.

Imagine, for instance, that Bob expects to be named the head of a new work team that is being formed. Instead, his supervisor, Jill, appoints someone else to lead the team. Jill actually has a more important and more prestigious role in mind for Bob, but Bob meanwhile is hurt and angry. Bob makes some sarcastic comments, which Jill thinks are out of line. Each becomes suspicious of the other, and soon they are in conflict. It was all caused by misperception and misunderstanding. What should they have done differently?



## ACTIVITY 1.3

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

### Checking Your Knowledge of Conflict

Are the following statements true or false? Mark the appropriate letter for each item.

- |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| 1. For the good of the organization, employees and managers should try to avoid conflicts whenever possible.  | T | F |
| 2. Conflict is about opposing or mutually incompatible goals.   | T | F |
| 3. Conflict is always negative, hostile, and hurtful.   | T | F |
| 4. Even if people are behaving normally—not yelling and screaming—there may be significant conflict going on. | T | F |
| 5. A loud argument is a clear sign of conflict.   | T | F |
| 6. Dogmatic people are not likely to engage in conflict.  | T | F |
| 7. Even if you're in the right, "winning" a conflict is not necessarily good for the organization.            | T | F |
| 8. The right kind of conflict can make people more creative.  | T | F |
| 9. Conflict can be helpful when it allows feelings to be vented.  | T | F |
| 10. Conflicts always damage personal relationships.   | T | F |

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Conflict itself is neither  
good nor bad. . . .  
What matters about conflict,  
in the end, is how we  
respond to it.

— **BRIAN MULDOON**

*The Heart of Conflict*

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## GETTING CONNECTED

For another self-assessment, try the Conflict Management Styles Assessment by the Blake Group.

<https://myqss.link/Conflict-Management-Styles>

## WORKSHOP WRAP-UP

- Conflict occurs when one person's attempt to reach his or her goals interferes with another person's attempt to do the same.
- Conflict can damage an organization in many ways: for instance, by diverting energy from important goals, by increasing stress and frustration, and ultimately by poisoning morale and destroying job commitment.
- Conflict does have its good side. It often improves decision making, stimulates creativity, injects energy and excitement into an organization, and leads to personal growth and greater understanding among employees.
- Several conditions help make a conflict constructive rather than destructive: for instance, seeing the problem as a mutual one with a win-win outcome, expressing ideas openly and clearly, treating others with respect, and being committed to the agreed-upon solution.