Among the numerous leadership principles, or “articles of faith,” that Amazon.com founder and CEO Jeff Bezos created when the online retailer sold only books, was an instruction to “disagree and commit.” Practically, this meant tearing into colleagues’ ideas with blunt feedback. Each year, Amazon recruiters identify thousands of job prospects who are screened by “bar raisers”—stars in the Amazon culture. The company links performance to the success of their assigned projects. The leadership principles emphasize continuing feedback as well as competition among employees to correct problems or suggest improvements. An emboldened junior employee co-invented Amazon’s drone-by-delivery service; and a lower-level operations executive developed an idea to get goods to urban customers in an hour or less—Amazon’s Prime Now service. “We always want to arrive at the right answer,” one company executive said. “It would certainly be much easier and socially cohesive to just compromise and not debate, but that may lead to the wrong decision.”

Unlike Amazon, many organizations are not comfortable with conflict. Not surprisingly, conflict within teams and between teams is one of the top concerns of team management. Many teams either actively avoid conflict and risk making “trips to Abilene” (as discussed in Chapter 7) or engage in personal, rather than principled, conflict. Some team leaders pride themselves on the fact that they never have conflict in their teams and these leaders do their teams a great disservice.

Differences in interests, perceptions, information, and preferences cannot be avoided especially in teams that work closely together for extended periods of time. Improperly managed conflict may lead to hostility, performance deficits and in extreme cases, the dissolution of the team. Under some circumstances, conflict can benefit teamwork. Engineers at Apple accustomed to working on their own projects in a silo, often find the peer-vetted reviews of their work disruptive. During the peer review, team members present their work to the team and receive both positive and negative feedback. This process can lead to conflict, but at the end of the day,

2Thompson, L. (2016). Leading high impact teams. Team leadership survey from the Kellogg School of Management Executive Program. Northwestern University, Evanston, IL.
team members agreed that this type of team conflict ensured that work didn’t progress too far without checks and balances and ultimately resulted in a better product.3

Conflict can have positive consequences, such as enhancing creativity or fostering integrative solutions that reflect many points of view. Alternatively, conflict can thwart a team’s effectiveness and performance.

In this chapter, we distinguish different types of conflict in teams. We describe different styles and methods of conflict resolution. We discuss minority versus majority conflict in teams. We focus on specific interventions that teams and their leaders can take to proactively manage conflict.

**RELATIONSHIP, TASK & PROCESS CONFLICT**

There are three distinct types of conflict: relationship, task, and process conflict (see Exhibit 8–1).4

**Relationship Conflict**

Relationship conflict is personal, defensive, and resentful. Also known as A-type conflict, emotional conflict, or affective conflict,5 it is rooted in anger, personal friction, personality clashes, ego, and tension. This is the type of conflict that most team leaders and team members try to avoid. Relationship conflict is more depleting and exhausting than other types of conflict.6 Consider when two top executives at Common Form Inc., held different views about when a product should launch. After weeks of tension, the conversation got heated and more confrontational, and the product launch was even further delayed.

Relationship conflict is not always expressed via open shouting matches. In fact, some people go to great lengths to avoid the overt expression of conflict. For example, Argyris describes a case in which lower-level managers identified a number of serious production and marketing problems in their company.7 They told the middle managers, and after the middle managers were convinced that the situation described by the lower managers actually was true, they began to release some of the bad news, but they did so carefully, in measured doses. They managed their communications carefully to make certain they were “covered” if upper management became upset. The result was

---


### Exhibit 8-1 Three Types of Conflict


that top management was never fully apprised of the problems—rather, they received a strangely edited view of the problem. Therefore, top management continued to speak glowingly about the product, in part to ensure that it would get the financial backing it needed from within the company. Lower-level managers became confused and eventually depressed because they could not understand why top management continued to support the product. Their reaction was to reduce the frequency of their memos and the intensity of the alarm they expressed, while simultaneously turning the problem over to middle management.

Relationship conflict is more likely to occur when teams experience **abusive supervision**. Some people are motivated to search for information regarding whether

---

other team members have threatened or harmed them. People who are high in **motivation to acquire relationship-threatening information (MARTI)**, make more sinister attributions about their coworkers, are more likely to exclude prospective group members from joining their group, and plan to reject them if they do become members.\(^9\) Examples of the types of statements that people high in MARTI endorse include the following: “I like working in groups and have often worked with other people in a group setting. However, I am always interested to know whether others in the group have said unkind or unfair things about me without me knowing about it” and “I want to know whether co-workers have said harmful things about me to other people in or outside the group.”

**Task Conflict**

**Task conflict**, or **cognitive conflict**, is largely depersonalized; also known as **C-type conflict**, it consists of argumentation about the merits of ideas, plans, and projects. Known as “radical candor” or “front-stabbing,” task conflict does not attack the person but rather focuses on ideas by asking employees to debate and talk.\(^10\) People who strongly identify with their group are more likely to speak up and show dissent when they perceive harm to the group’s welfare.\(^11\) For example, while at Google, Sheryl Sandberg told a fellow Google executive that she sounded unintelligent by saying “um” too much in an important meeting.\(^12\) In some situations, task conflict can be effective in stimulating creativity because it encourages people to rethink problems and arrive at outcomes with which everyone can live. For example, when the majority is confronted by the differing opinions of minorities, they are prompted to think about why the minorities disagree and in so doing, generate more novel ideas.\(^13\) Further, people who engage in task-related communication cooperate more in mixed-motive situations because talking about the task activates thoughts and norms related to fairness and trust.\(^14\)

**Process Conflict**

**Process conflict** centers on disagreements that team members have about how to approach a task and specifically, who should do what. Process conflict often involves disagreements among team members as to how to achieve a goal. Process conflict ran high when Pebble, the company that developed the smartwatch, joined forces with Apple to develop an application for iPhone users. The team disagreed about deadlines.

---


\(^12\)Feintzeig (2015, December 30). “Nice’ is a four-letter word at companies practicing radical candor.”


for testing the application and review processes, and the result was almost a 6-month delayed launch.\textsuperscript{15}

**IMPACT ON PERFORMANCE**

How does the nature of conflict affect team performance? A 2012 meta-analysis revealed a negative relationship between relationship conflict and team outcomes.\textsuperscript{16} However, there was not a significant negative relationship between task conflict and group performance, suggesting that task conflict was not detrimental to team performance. A study of 145 organizational teams revealed that task conflict predicted better group performance; but relationship conflict was associated with worse performance.\textsuperscript{17}

Certain conditions enable task conflict to improve team performance. Specifically, there are three conditions under which greater task conflict can enhance team productivity: task complexity, information processing capability, and appropriate expression.\textsuperscript{18} Stated succinctly, the often negative relationship between task conflict and team performance can be positive when: (1) tasks are sufficiently complex; (2) the team members can process information; and (3) conflict is expressed in an appropriate manner when it emerges. Moreover, a study of 232 employees in a health care organization revealed that mild task conflict engendered more information acquisition, however more frequent, intense task conflict hindered information acquisition.\textsuperscript{19} When team members engage in mild task conflict, they are more active, energized, interested, and excited, all of which lead to greater job satisfaction.

Relationship conflict interferes with the effort people put into a task because members are preoccupied with reducing threats, increasing power, and attempting to build cohesion rather than working on the task. The anxiety produced by interpersonal animosity may inhibit cognitive functioning\textsuperscript{20} and distract team members from the task, causing them to work less effectively and produce suboptimal products.\textsuperscript{21} Relationship conflict is detrimental to both performance and satisfaction (two major indices of team productivity) because emotionality reduces team effectiveness.\textsuperscript{22}

---

\textsuperscript{15}Mark Gurman, M. (2015, June 3). Pebble blames Apple for delayed iOS Pebble Time app as first backers receive watches. 9to5Mac. 9to5mac.com; Kelly, H. (2015, September 23). Pebble launches round, thin smartwatch. CNN Money. money.cnn.com


increases rigidity in terms of people holding onto suboptimal preferences, leading to poor decisions. In addition, relationship conflict negatively interferes with a team’s ability to process information. A field study of task and relationship conflict in work teams in Taiwan and Indonesia revealed that relationship conflict exacerbated the negative relationship between task conflict and team performance. When it comes to team satisfaction, relationship conflict is more disruptive for teams than is task conflict. Indeed, relationship conflict is more interpersonal, emotional, and likely to be directed at others.

Some investigations have studied the time course of conflict in teams. Groups that have high levels of trust among their members during the early stages of group development are buffered from experiencing future relationship conflict (see Exhibit 8-2). When groups receive negative performance feedback early on, both relationship and task conflict

---

**Factors that Affect Intragroup Trust**

- **Risk-tolerance of group.
- Number of similarities among group members.
- Alignment of group interests.
- Individual members demonstrate competence in carrying out their tasks and fulfill their promises.
- Group members behave consistently.
- Conversations are open and frequent.

**Exhibit 8-2 Trust Tempers Negative Conflict**


---


Part 2 • Team Performance

Increased team conflict also leads teams to unintentionally restructure themselves inefficiently. When teams experience conflict, they have lower trust, which leads them to reduce individual autonomy and loosen task interdependencies in the team.28

**PERSONALITY & CONFLICT**

One investigation examined three “dark personality” traits—manipulativeness, narcissism, and secondary psychopathy. Teams whose members were higher in secondary psychopathy were more likely to have poor conflict resolution strategies which led to lower task performance.29 Conversely, when team members are high in openness or emotional stability, task conflict has a positive impact on performance. However, when team members are low in openness or emotional stability, task conflict has a negative impact on performance.30

**TEAM IDENTIFICATION**

Task and relationship conflict tend to be positively correlated: task conflict often can be associated with relationship conflict and vice-versa in a team. To the extent that team members have a high level of team identification however, task conflict can be de-coupled from relationship conflict.31

**POWER & CONFLICT**

**Team power** refers to the control of resources that enables a team to influence others in the organization. Process conflict is higher in high-power teams, as compared to low-power teams, thus rendering teams higher in power to underperform relative to teams lower in power.32 The type of conflict behavior (constructive vs. destructive) in teams depends on the power of the team, as well as the likelihood that power determines victory and defeat. In one investigation, teams who were low in power became more constructive when power would not determine victory and the threat of defeat was low, as compared to high-power teams.33 However, when power determines victory and defeat, powerless groups tend to behave more unconstructively.

---

Organizational Climate and Conflict

Teams that lack uniformity in their organizational climate have higher levels of task conflict as well as lower communication quality than teams that establish uniform climate patterns (in which team members share similar perceptions of organizational support).34

Global Culture and Conflict

Differences exist among global cultures about conflict. Compared to East Asians, Americans exhibit an optimistic bias about relationship conflict.35 When it comes to task conflict, both Americans and East Asians believe in addressing conflict proactively, but European Americans don’t think that it is necessary to address relationship conflict to get good performance. Americans are more likely than East Asians to join a talented group that is known to have high relationship conflict.

Linguistic-related challenges in multicultural teams increase the likelihood of relationship conflict.36 For this reason, talking about the conflict actually may do more harm than good. With regard to cultural beliefs, Americans are considered to be largely individualistic as compared to Asians, who are considered to be collectivistic.37 When a norm of collectivism is manipulated (imposed on a group), members with concordant attitudes are evaluated more positively than those with dissenting attitudes; but when a norm of individualism is imposed, dissenters are more highly valued.38

Given the differences in cultural styles of expressing conflict, teams are well served to discuss differences and in some cases, provide training. For example, when Sonu Shivdasani, the CEO of luxury resort chain Soneva, bought a hotel management company in Thailand, he found that the Thai business culture required some adjustments from his Western business norms. Thai people place such importance on respecting authority that Shivdasani’s personal assistant would crouch on her knees when entering his office so that her head would be below his. The CEO offended some of his managers by speaking in a manner perceived as blunt in a culture where raising one’s voice typically leads to greater silence from the listener. So, the company developed its own “Soneva” language of 200–300 words to transcend vast cultural differences. For example, all employees are referred to as “hosts” in order to give them a sense of familial ownership. With the new language, traditionally reluctant employees began to speak out more. “In a discussion, even when they are two or three layers below the most senior person, they will be quite happy to make their points, and they’ll feel empowered to make statements that may be in disagreement,” Shivdasani said.39

---

TYPES OF CONFLICT

**Proportional and Perceptual Conflict**

Proportional conflict occurs when team members have different ideas about the amount and type of conflict that exists in their group. In any team, for example, there may be differing actual levels of relationship, task, and process conflict, and the relative levels of such conflicts are crucial aspects for team leaders to understand because they affect task performance. Proportional conflict composition describes the relationship among the three types of conflict (task, relationship, and process) as the level of each type of conflict proportional to the other two and to the overall level of conflict within the group, rather than as an absolute level or amount of any one type. For example, a team that experiences a moderate amount of constructive task conflict and no other conflict (no relationship or process conflict) will have a different experience than will members of another group with not only the same amount of task conflict but also a high proportional level of relationship conflict. In the former group, members should experience less stress, less distraction, and less anger, which are frequent consequences of relationship conflict as compared to members of the group containing more moderate levels of task and relationship conflict. Indeed, teams with a high proportion of task conflict experience a higher level of team member commitment, cohesiveness, individual performance, group performance, and member satisfaction. In contrast, a high proportion of relationship conflict is related negatively to member commitment, cohesiveness, individual performance, group performance, and member satisfaction.

Perceptual conflict refers to the extent to which there is agreement or a lack thereof, in terms of whether team members perceive conflict. Perceptual conflict composition is the degree to which each person in a team perceives levels of conflict differently from other team members. Specifically, each member’s perceptions of conflict are compared to all other members’ perceptions of the group. For example: Two team members in an eight-person team perceive arguments in the group pertaining to the task, while the other six members do not detect such conflict. These two members have a larger perceptual conflict composition score than those members who believe that there is no task conflict. A study of 51 workgroups revealed that differences in the perceptions of conflict decreased team performance and creativity in teams.

---


41Ibid.


44Ibid.

CONFLICT STATES VS. CONFLICT PROCESSES

Conflict states are distinguishable from conflict processes.46 Conflict states are shared perceptions among members of the team about the intensity of disagreement about either tasks (i.e., goals, ideas, and performance strategies) or relationships (i.e. personality clashes, interpersonal styles). Conversely, conflict processes are members’ interactions aimed at working through task and interpersonal disagreements. Most notably, states and processes affect team outcomes, but the processes teams use to manage their differences explain more variance in outcomes. In terms of key processes, collectivistic conflict process (i.e., concern for the team as a whole) is positively related to better performance and more positive affective outcomes. Conversely, individualistic processes (i.e., concern for individuals) are negatively related to both performance and affective team outcomes.47

CONFLICT CONTAGION

Conflict contagion refers to how interpersonal, dyadic conflict can spread to others. Conflict contagion can lead to conflict escalation.48

DISTRIBUTIVE VS. PROCEDURAL CONFLICT

Sometimes, people engage in conflict about the distribution of scarce resources, such as salaries and support staff. In other instances, people are involved in conflict concerning procedures. People often become so preoccupied with concerns about distributive and procedural fairness that they monitor others and gather and process information in their organization. For example, employees who regard their organization to be market-focused tend to gather information about distributive fairness; conversely, employees who regard their organization to be bureaucratic tend to gather information about procedural justice.49 Prospective group members use procedural allocation criteria as one basis for choosing groups and show a strong preference for equality-based groups.50

EQUITY, EQUALITY AND NEED

There are at least three different ways of allocating scarce resources. The equity method (or contribution-based distribution) prescribes that benefits (and costs) should be proportional to team members’ contributions.51 The equality method (or blind justice)

47 Ibid.
prescribes that all team members should suffer or benefit equally, regardless of input.\textsuperscript{52} The \textbf{need} method (or welfare-based justice) prescribes that benefits (and costs) should be proportional to members’ needs.\textsuperscript{53}

Groups that emphasize productivity favor equity rules, but there is little evidence that equity actually facilitates productivity in groups. Equity facilitates productivity in groups whose members have an independent (i.e., self-interested) self-construal as opposed to an interdependent construal.\textsuperscript{54} Another problem is that some people often feel more entitled than others do. For example, team members who contribute less prefer to divide resources equally, whereas those who contribute more prefer the equity rule.\textsuperscript{55} In groups containing members with different power or status levels, those with low power want equality, whereas those with high power desire equity.\textsuperscript{56} In short, most people feel entitled to more resources than others believe that they merit. Oftentimes, this is driven by egocentric valuations of one’s own contributions to a joint task. For example, in one investigation, team members were asked to complete several questionnaires.\textsuperscript{57} These took either 45 or 90 minutes. The questionnaires were constructed such that for each duration some participants completed six questionnaires, whereas others completed only three. When asked to allocate monetary rewards, participants emphasized the dimension that favored them in the allocation procedure (those who worked longer emphasized time; questionnaire completion was emphasized by those who worked on more questionnaires). Most people, however, are not aware that their own perceptions of fairness are egocentrically biased.

There is no objectively correct method of justice. In fact, teams often have several different methods in operation at any one time. For example, consider a study group in a semester-long course. Team members may assign work on a joint project on the basis of equity, such that people with greater experience and skills in a certain subject area are expected to bring more knowledge to the task (e.g., the finance major might be expected to read the financial report individually, perform all the calculations, and develop a spreadsheet by himself or herself). In terms of reserving study group rooms and bringing snacks for group meetings, the group might use an equality method, such that each week a different group member is expected to supply drinks and cookies and reserve a room. This group occasionally might invoke a need-based justice system when, for example, a study group member misses three group meetings in preparation for a wedding. The rest of the group may agree to cover his or her work so that the teammate can prepare for the wedding. The question of how to reduce self-serving, or egoistic, judgments of entitlements in teams is vexing. While it would seem that perspective taking may minimize egocentric judgments, people who are encouraged to consider the perspectives of others increase their egoistic (selfish) behavior, such that they actually

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{53}Deutsch, M. (1975). Equity, equality, and need: What determines which value will be used as the basis of distributive justice? \textit{Journal of Social Issues}, 31, 137–149.
  \item \textsuperscript{57}Van Avermaet, E. (1975). \textit{Equity: A theoretical and experimental analysis}. Doctoral dissertation, University of California, Santa Barbara.
\end{itemize}
take more available resources.\textsuperscript{58} Perhaps even more surprising is that groups do not like members who are unselfish. When groups perceive members to be contributing too much toward the provision of a good, but then use little of that good, they are targets of expulsion from the group.\textsuperscript{59} Apparently, such group members are seen as establishing an undesirable behavior standard.

MINORITY AND MAJORITY CONFLICT

Sometimes, conflicts involve subgroups within a given team, involving a majority and a minority. There are two ways in which majorities and minorities influence their teams. One method is through \textit{direct influence}, such as when they entice other team members to adopt their position. Another method is via \textit{indirect influence}, in which people in the majority privately agree with the minority.\textsuperscript{60} When people change their attitudes and behaviors as a result of direct influence or pressure, it is referred to as \textit{compliance} (early and direct adoption of a position); in contrast, when people change their attitudes and behavior as a result of their own thinking about a subject, it is known as \textit{conversion} (private acceptance). Conversion also can occur at a latent level and have a delayed impact, such as when change occurs later, known as the \textit{sleeper effect}.\textsuperscript{61} Conversion is a more stable form of attitude change because a person changes inwardly, not just outwardly, to please others. Minorities induce conversion, whereas majorities induce compliance.

Minorities who are perceived as experts serve as a catalyst by increasing the quality of majority members’ cognitions and whether the majority makes more accurate private judgments.\textsuperscript{62} Minorities in groups are beneficial because they stimulate greater thought about issues.\textsuperscript{63} When minorities in a group express a differing opinion, the general level of cognitive activity in the group increases and group members engage in more message scrutiny.\textsuperscript{64} Minority opinions do not simply get groups to focus on a given message; they stimulate much broader thinking about the issue in general and open the doors to considering multiple perspectives, perhaps only one of which might represent the minority’s view.\textsuperscript{65} Minorities are able to shift norms about helping behavior in a group.

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\end{thebibliography}
through modeling and advocating. Indeed, people who have been exposed to minority dissent search for more information about all sides of an issue, remember more information, deploy more effective performance strategies, detect solutions that are elusive to others, think in more complex ways, and are more creative. The authors of U.S. Supreme Court majority opinions tend to concern themselves with specifying all imaginable contingencies under which the law should and should not apply to ensure the longevity of their precedent. In contrast, the authors of minority U.S. Supreme Court opinions often focus on arguments that eventually could facilitate the precedent’s overruling. People who are exposed to members who hold a minority view experience an increase in their own levels of integrative thought; in contrast, people exposed to majority opinions or unanimous groups actually experience a decrease in integrative thinking. Teams make better decisions when a minority viewpoint is present and expressed.

In addition to instigating greater message scrutiny and cognitive activity, statistical minorities stimulate divergent thinking. While majorities induce thoughts that are convergent in the sense of focusing on one solution to the exclusion of all others, minorities induce divergent thinking by considering several perspectives. In this sense, minorities are more likely than majorities to have more original thoughts. For example, their associations to words under dispute are more original than majority groups. Even when a minority is wrong about a given issue, its presence adds value to a group by stimulating divergent thinking, increasing creative ideas, generating more ideas, and arriving at better solutions. However, minorities certainly are not always successful in terms of stimulating conversion. Indeed, people in groups may want to actively dissociate from the minority subgroup so as to avoid ridicule and rejection. When

---

76 Nemeth & Rogers, “Dissent and the search for information.”
group members actively avoid minority members, their attitudes about related topics might change.\textsuperscript{79}

In some cases, minorities might be harassed or pressured by the majority. In fact, a “harassed” minority is actually more persuasive than a nonharassed minority on both direct and indirect measures of influence.\textsuperscript{80} The reason why harassed minorities are viewed more positively is rooted in the \textit{courage hypothesis}—people who persist in the face of hardship and ridicule are viewed as particularly sincere, confident, and courageous, given that they are willing to risk social censure. The braver the members of the minority appear to be, the greater their impact. And, if harassed minorities persist in public (rather than in private), they are even more admired and persuasive.\textsuperscript{81}

\textbf{Work–Family Conflict}

Some teams struggle because team members experience a conflict between work and team obligations and commitment to their own family. Work–family conflict (WFC) might be expressed at the individual level, such as when a person feels stress about their own work–family situation or at the level of the team. WFC is stronger for people who are demographically dissimilar to their team in terms of gender and number of dependents.\textsuperscript{82} WFC at the work group level leads to WFC at the individual level. When team members feel that they have social support from the team, however, WFC is reduced.

\textbf{Organizational Culture Conflict}

Leaders’ conflict management behaviors give rise to three distinct cultures in organizations: collaborative, dominating, and avoidant. An investigation of 92 branches of a large bank revealed that conflict cultures affect branch viability (i.e., cohesion, potency, and burnout) and branch performance (i.e., creativity and customer service).\textsuperscript{83}

\textbf{Conflict Management}

Next, we present models for resolving conflict.

\textbf{Conflict Modes}

According to Thomas, people can take at least five courses of action when they find themselves involved in conflict.\textsuperscript{84} The five choices differ depending upon the extent to which people are concerned for themselves and the other party (see Exhibit 8-3).


Let’s use the model to analyze a conflict that occurred at Columbia Sportswear company (see Exhibit 8-4). Before Neal Boyle (husband and father) died, his wife and son were engaged in a long-standing stalemate in which they did not engage or interact very much. When Neal died, Tim and his mother, Gert, competed, each intimidating the other. However when they focused on a higher-order goal, cut their salaries, and rebuilt the company, they were engaged in collaboration. When the question of off-shoring came up, Gert capitulated to Tim and accommodated his desires. It is fortunate for the company that Tim and Gert moved from avoidance to collaboration at a critical stage in their company’s life.
with numerous future disputes). Gert eventually accommodated Tim’s wishes and agreed to move production to Asia. The mother and son team carved out separate areas of authority and avoided frequent contact. Specifically, Tim focused on driving “Columbia’s strategy and expanding the company globally; Gert became the company’s ambassador, hosting company tours” and starring in Columbia’s marketing ads as “one tough mother.” Their differing responsibilities, and the fact that they moved their offices to opposite sides of the company headquarters, reduced the potential for conflict. The two learned how to work together, and separately, for the benefit of the company. The company achieved record sales of $2.1 billion in 2014 and shares rose 25 percent in 2015. That year the company launched a global advertising campaign “Tested Tough,” which featured 91-year-old Gert—still the company chairman and still coming to work every day as she has for 50 years.

Exhibit 8-4 Columbia Sportswear Company


Contingency Theory of Task Conflict and Performance in Teams

A contingency perspective views team performance as a function of the type of task conflict, the conflict management approach, and the nature of the task performed by the group. As can be seen in Exhibit 8-5, the amount of conflict is a direct determinant of team performance and individual well-being (i.e., individual satisfaction).

Exhibit 8-5 Conflict and Team Performance


In the model, the type of conflict might be either the content of the task or the process of the task (similar to task conflict and process conflict, as described earlier). **Task-content conflicts** are disagreements among team members’ ideas and opinions about the task being performed, including debates about facts or opinions. In contrast, **task-process conflicts** are conflicts about logistical and delegation issues, such as how to proceed and allocate work.

Individual well-being exerts a powerful effect on how people deal with conflict. For example, people who endure levels of high stress activate hormones that result in a number of negative physiological outcomes, including headaches and increased cardiovascular response. Several investigations—one involving more than 3,000 employees—reveal a positive and significant correlation between conflict at work and physical health problems.

**INVESTMENT MODEL OF CONFLICT**

Rubult’s EVLN model of conflict in close relationships argues that people can take one of four approaches when confronted with conflict: exit, voice, loyalty, or neglect. **Exit** refers to formally separating, or moving out of a relationship and in many cases ending all contact. **Loyalty** occurs when people passively wait and hope that things will improve. **Voice** involves discussing problems, investing in mutually agreeable solutions, and a willingness to change. For example, a manager says, “I need to talk to you about something that is bothering me . . .” or “I feel uncomfortable about the status of the current project, and I suspect you might feel the same way, and I hope to clarify . . .” **Neglect** happens when people ignore the other party and are passive. To the extent that people are satisfied with their relationship, they are more likely to use voice and loyalty (versus exit or neglect). When people are highly invested, they are more likely to use voice and loyalty. Team-level commitment moderates the relationship between organizational-level commitment and the use of EVLN, such that greater commitment increases the use of voice.

A longitudinal investigation of 38 workers revealed two additional destructive options: imagined exit and brutal neglect. In some teams, members might engage in open hostility or attack one another. Exhibit 8–6 (Conflict Choices) represents an application of Rubult’s conflict model to people in business teams. In this model, people’s behavior in conflict is depicted in terms of two key dimensions: active versus passive behavior and constructive versus destructive action. When people are passive and destructive, they engage in **avoidance**. This means ignoring the other party or not engaging in a potentially clarifying discussion.

---


Let’s use the model to examine a business conflict. After nearly a month of careful avoidance of one another at parades and political party functions (neglect), New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo and New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio finally reached out via a telephone call to air their mutual concerns (engage). The conversation was the first interaction between the two politicians since de Blasio lambasted the governor’s lack of support for affordable housing in New York City (attack). The discord between the two politicians had been the negative backdrop to a large number of tussles between City Hall and the state government in Albany; staff members on both sides were relieved when the two men made efforts to communicate.90

When a person actively undermines the other person and recruits resources to block and thwart them, this is known as attack. For example, Andrew Cornell, CEO of Cornell Iron Works in Mountaintop, Pennsylvania, aims to not become a boss known for tirades. Although he sometimes feels like yelling when employees don’t or can’t meet his expectations, Mr. Cornell bites his tongue. “Yelling is a vestige of a past time, and I always regret it,” he says.91
**Wageman and Donnenfeld’s Conflict Intervention Model**

Wageman and Donnenfeld distinguish four kinds of interventions that team leaders and managers can use to improve the quality of conflict resolution processes:

- **Team (re)Design:** Deliberate changes in the structure (e.g., environment and tasks) in which teams do their work. Interventions might include increasing the amount of task interdependence that a team has in accomplishing a given work product. Team design usually involves very specific, structural changes to a group, which might include how the goal is defined, who is on the team, the nature and amount of resources allocated to the team, team rewards, and norms of conduct.

- **Task process coaching:** Coaching that helps the team perform better via changes in effort, strategy, and talent. Task process coaching is different from conflict process coaching in that task process coaching is aimed exclusively at improving motivation, strategy, and talent but not conflict per se. Task process coaching may include developing team members’ skills, improving the communication system, and so on.

- **Conflict process coaching:** Direct intervention in a team to improve the quality of conflict in the team. Interventions might include trust-building exercises, structured debate, and appointing a devil’s advocate.

- **Changing the individual:** Individual-level training with the goal of making specific team members more tolerant, thoughtful, and capable when they disagree with others. This might include behavioral training in negotiation.

Wageman and Donnenfeld propose four guiding principles for enhancing teams with respect to conflict:

**Principle 1:** Of all the strategies listed above, Team (re)Design has the largest effects. For this reason, Wageman and Donnenfeld suggest starting at this point of intervention. An effective team design addresses the root causes of most team conflicts. One important aspect of team design is the stated goal of the team. Teams that agree on a common goal or shared vision are more successful than those that don’t or can’t. When 33 Chilean miners were trapped one-half mile beneath the ground, they survived by creating a leadership structure focused on one goal: surviving until they could be rescued. For 69 days, the miners maintained a leadership structure by choosing a leader and delegating tasks. The miners followed a strict schedule of daily tasks such as exercise and cleaning up the very informal living area. Every decision was voted upon.

---


96 Ibid.

Common goals do not imply homogeneous thinking, but they do require everyone to share a vision. Consider the two advertising executives who launched ZinePak, a company that packages CDs, glossy magazines, interviews, and merchandise that appeal to what they call “superfans.” Co-founder Kim Kaupe and Brittany Hodak shared a vision for growth, saying they would rather own “10% of a hundred million-dollar pie, than own 100% of a 5-million-dollar pie.” They also had to share the vision of controlling 51% of their company after they appeared on Shark Tank.98

**Principle 2:** After the team is well designed, the team leader should use the strategy of coaching the team. Coaching the team can work only if the team is well designed. Coaching that focuses on the key performance drivers reinforces the team design. After taking over as Ford’s CEO in 2006, Alan Mulally instituted a weekly meeting, called the Business Plan Meeting (BPR) where managers presented a report on his/her areas, coded in green, yellow or red, to show whether business was on target. At the first BPR, all of Ford’s managers coded their business unit reports as green. Mr. Mulally used the meetings as coaching opportunities by supporting leaders who helped one another rather than focusing solely on problems within their business unit. In one meeting, the team clapped when a manager put a red flag on his own program.99

**Principle 3:** Coaching about conflict might engender resistance relative to discussions about motivation, strategy, or leveraging talent in the team. In some cases, coaching about conflict and relationships might even backfire.100 Yet, it often can be effective for a team to develop strategies for dealing with potential future conflict proactively. Indeed, groups that develop norms regarding how they will manage conflict are more effective than those that do not develop norms.101 And, groups that develop collaborative conflict norms make more effective group decisions than do groups that use contending or avoidance styles. Conflict norms also carry over to affect other team activities, such as decision making that doesn’t necessarily involve conflict. Furthermore, friends are better at applying effective conflict management strategies to suit the task at hand than are teams of strangers whose conflict management approaches are less sophisticated.102

One type of intervention is structured debate. Most people, even seasoned managers and executives, feel uncomfortable about conflict. However, it is much easier to deal with conflict by creating a time and place for it to occur, rather than expecting it to naturally erupt. Furthermore, discussing the potential for conflict before it erupts is a lot more effective than trying to deal with it after the fact. At Southwest Airlines, leaders wanted to change a culture of “artificial harmony” among employees. So, the airline began promoting middle managers to executive positions based on that manager’s ability to spark positive conflict among their team members. In addition, the newly

---

minted managers attended a five-week training program to help them learn to embrace and foster rigorous internal debates.\textsuperscript{103}

With regard to conflict coaching, it is important to focus on content rather than style. In other words, focus on the substance, not the delivery. The most successful project teams are those that rise above style issues and focus on content.\textsuperscript{104} The focus on content, rather than style, is similar to the prescriptive advice of “separating the people from the problem.”\textsuperscript{105}

**Principle 4:** Changing individuals will have its greatest impact only after the team design and team processes are addressed. People have a better chance of changing when the team design is optimal and the core team processes are positive, thereby serving to reinforce individual behavior.

**INTERESTS, RIGHTS, AND POWER MODEL OF DISPUTING**

According to the interests, rights, and power model, team members tend to use one of the following three methods to resolve disputes: interests-based arguments, rights-based arguments, or power-based arguments. A rights-based argument focuses on applying some standard of fairness, precedent, contract, or law. A power-based approach is characterized by the use of force, intimidation, rank, or power. Avoidance is yet another option for team members. Collaborative styles of conflict management, such as constructive controversy, are more beneficial for team performance.\textsuperscript{106} An interest-based approach focuses on satisfying both parties’ core interests; when people set aside questions of right and wrong, they can sometimes craft terms that meet their most important interests but usually not all of them.

As an example of the difference between collaborating (interests) and contending (i.e., rights- or power-based approaches) in teams, consider a team in which there has been a serious, long-standing conflict concerning the nature of the assignments given to team members. Some assignments are clearly regarded as more attractive and career-enhancing than others. However, for the organization to be successful, all assignments must be covered by the team. One of the members, Larry, begins a meeting by stating, “I am not at all happy with how the assignments for the project are handled. I consistently have to do the least attractive part of the project, and it is a lot of work. I want to be excused from that part of the project in the future.” Three team members might respond in the following ways, depending on which approach they take to the conflict at hand:

- **Collaborative (interests-based) response:** “Larry, I’ve sensed that this is of great concern to you. We’d all like to hear more about your own views about this and


what your proposals are. I will be honest in saying that I am not sure anything can change, at least for now, but I think that it is important that we all have a chance to understand exactly how each one of us perceives the workload and assignments on the project at this point.”

- **Contending (rights-based) response:** “Look, Larry, you agreed to cover that part of the project when we first took on the challenge four years ago. As a matter of fact, I believe that I have an email from you indicating that you would agree to do that part of the work. As far as I am concerned, this is strictly a matter of precedent and what people have agreed to do. I am sure that our supervisor would reach the same conclusion as I would if she saw the email I am referring to.”

- **Contending (power-based) response:** “I think you are completely out of line, Larry. It is not helping our team effort to have people such as yourself acting like prima donnas and demanding special treatment. We all have important things to do to meet the project goals. I am tired of having to walk on eggshells around this issue, and I don’t think that discussing unrealistic and selfish goals is a good use of our team time. We could simply follow a principle of rank in our team but that would be bad for you. I am ready to continue our democratic process, but only on the condition that you start working with us as a team.”

The power-based team member in this example is using several techniques designed to threaten and intimidate. First, there are numerous unflattering character attacks—Larry is labeled as “out of line,” “demanding,” a “prima donna,” and “unrealistic and selfish.” This comment also contains some thinly disguised threats: If Larry does not shut up, this team member intends to notify a superior. The rights-based team member, by focusing on the past, effectively says, “We cannot have this discussion.” The interests-based team member clearly states that there might not be any room for movement, but she is open to discussion. In this way, the interests-based response models the double-loop style of communication.107 Most people, when faced with sensitive and important issues, find it far easier to launch into rights- or power-based arguments. However, nearly any rights- or power-based argument can be converted into an interests-based response without forcing team members to capitulate to others.

**Chapter Capstone**

Conflict in teams is inevitable. However, it does not have to result in decreased productivity. Managed effectively, conflict can be key to leveraging differences of interest to arrive at creative solutions. Many people however, instinctively respond to conflict in a defensive fashion, and this emotional type of conflict can threaten productivity. To the greatest extent possible, team members should depersonalize conflict. The most effective teams share several common practices when it comes to conflict and conflict management. They

---

realize that conflict is an inevitable aspect of high-performance teamwork. Second, they deal with conflict proactively, meaning that they develop procedures and practices to deal with it before it emerges. Groups that improve or maintain top performance over time share three conflict resolution best practices: (1) they focus on the content of their interactions, rather than the delivery style (i.e., tone); (2) they explicitly discuss reasons behind work assignment decisions; and (3) they assign work to members who have the task expertise rather than by other means, such as volunteerism or convenience.108

108Behfar, Peterson, Mannix, & Trochim, “The critical role of conflict resolution in teams.”