

CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Understanding Human Behavior to Resolve Conflict in Your Workplace

by Leroy Hamm



The hope of every relationship is to keep conflict to a minimum; but once you find yourself in a polarized “us vs. them” or “me vs. you” mind set, the challenge is stepping out of the conflict and looking at conflict in terms of interests versus position.

In a world filled with conflict, resolving it can seem like an impossibility. The news media covers the atrocities and brings out the experts to explain the history and causes of each conflict as it arises in various regions around the world. Governments work feverishly to prevent more conflict and often feel powerless to stop the waves of carnage and violence set in motion from years and even decades of tension and power struggles. Opposing sides hurl accusations back and forth and justify their actions by venting the awfulness of the opposition. Labels are set in concrete, and a way back to peaceful resolution appears impossible. Winning at all costs becomes the only option.

Move this scenario to the arena of marriage or the workplace, and it plays out the same. Fill in the counselor for the “expert” and the man and woman and their extended families for the “governments,” and conflict comes to the same conclusion. To stop the downward spiral, resolve differences and prevent future conflicts between governments, cultures, husband and wife, or associates in business, the causes and effects have definite parallels. The hope of every relationship is to keep conflict to a minimum; but once you find yourself in a polarized “us vs. them” or “me vs. you” mind set, the challenge is stepping out of the conflict and looking at conflict in terms of interests versus position.

For example, in the Cold War, the U.S. position was that the Soviet Union was an evil empire whose goal was world domination, and they would stop at nothing until they had achieved it. The Soviet Union position was that the U.S. was an evil capitalist whose goal was world domination and it would achieve it at all costs. However, the treaties hammered out over the decades of Cold War tensions focused on mutual interests, the most obvious being world peace.

Mutual Interests Vs. Perspective

Keeping mutual interests in focus is paramount to a mutually agreeable resolution of conflict. A domestic conflict which focuses on mutual

interests, such as the children's needs being met, is more productive than a positional perspective where demands come from who gets what. As a business partner, associate or employee, if I make judgements about you from a positional perspective, then you are a threat to me. I have already read and assigned motives which moves our relationship into an arena of power plays, and whatever you do means my position is diminished and I get less. So I shift into a position of survival.

To prevent this destructive process from coming to fruition, communication of common interests is imperative. The key word here is communication. I recently attended the wedding of my best friend's son and his bride. In the wedding ceremony, the preacher said, "The most important thing in marriage is communication." My first thought was, "It depends on what you're communicating." If my basic premise and language in a disagreement is with absolutes such as "you always" or "you never" or "why don't you ever?" then I am speaking from a positional perspective, which creates only defensiveness. My language has already painted and confirmed a polarized picture of your position. I am the judge and jury. If on the other hand, I use the language of interest, I might say, "I want to make sure you and I are on the same page. What is it you would like to see happen?" or "I can help you if you will let me know what you need in plenty of time." In other words, you are not getting hooked into being defensive and defending your position; but you are showing respect and being assertive in moving toward mutual interests. "What would you think?" or "How would you feel if we did . . ." creates an environment in which you can work toward mutual interests. Attack the problem, not the person. The statement "I am upset about this" is more effective and creates less defensiveness than "You tick me off!" Keep it professional, not personal.

Basic Temperaments

To understand why conflict happens, some basic differences in people need to be kept in mind. Human behavior comes from nature, nurture and choice. First, nature: The concept of genetic

predisposition (heredity) is 2,400 years old. The way people create and resolve conflict has to do first with what drives and motivates them internally. Alexander the Great, Napoleon, Hitler and Stalin were all driven by the need to dominate. Anyone in their way was a threat to the creation of their empire and were defeated. Unfortunately for them, this created many enemies and they went out in the same way they came in — through destruction. A person with this dominant temperament, when not controlled, creates his own conflict as he scatters bodies on his way to the top and shows disregard for the position and interests of others. Results may come quickly initially, but relationships are damaged and he finds that when he needs to rely on others to help protect his interests and defend his position(s), he may not have the support he needs.

Secondly, entertainers like Lucille Ball, Carol Burnett, Jay Leno, and Robin Williams and politicians like Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton are driven by the need to influence people and to look good. Their strength is their charisma with people. They are cheerleaders of life and cause others around them to feel good. Their temperament weakness, however, is lack of follow through and inattention to details. A person with this dominant temperament, when not controlled, creates his own conflict because of his inconsistent leadership, which creates frustration in others. Eventually his reliance on his effervescent personality to cover his mistakes may not be enough to win back others who feel they can no longer give him their confidence, trust and loyalty.

Thirdly, the school teacher, nurse, customer care and middle management administrator who is driven by the need to accommodate others, to maintain harmony, and whose motto is "peace at all costs" finds the costs for not resolving conflict very high. These people are the "worker bees" and "glue" that hold companies together. They are typically loyal to a fault. Their temperament weakness, however, is procrastination and passivity. When not controlled, this temperament will allow problems to grow and they find themselves faced with unresolved

Conflict Resolution With Guests

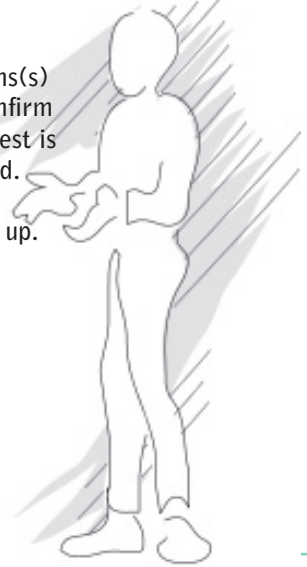
Listen to guests and show concern.

Apologize/acknowledge their frustration.

Ask guests what you can do for them. Offer choices if necessary.

Reach solutions(s) and confirm that guest is satisfied.

Follow up.



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conflict hoping that it will go away by itself. Conflict, to them, is bad and to be avoided at all costs. The cost may be damage to the organization, to their own self confidence, and to the confidence others place in them to do their job — which includes resolving conflicts. They must learn that a confronter is a peacemaker; an appeaser is a troublemaker.

The fourth basic temperament is often found in technicians, bookkeepers, accountants and anyone responsible for maintaining and/or processing details to insure quality in product and service. They are driven by the need to do things right. Their weaknesses, however, are indecision and not delegating. When not controlled, these weaknesses can frustrate others, especially the extrovert temperaments who tend to be more assertive and make decisions more quickly. Conflict can arise quickly when others don't realize that statements like, "That's close enough." or "It's in the ballpark." can cause this temperament to see red. To them, accuracy is next to Godliness. Also, not delegating to those who are capable, causes others to feel a lack of trust from this analytical individual who tends to look over the employees shoulder and conflict is likely. If this individual will learn to "inspect what they expect" and manage by agreement, they will enhance the relationships they have with their direct reports.

Motivation

One key to resolving conflict involves keeping focused on the behavior and not analyzing another's motives. However, it is very helpful if you know some basic causes of why people do what they do. It helps you understand, accept, and even appreciate the fundamental differences in people. If I think others generally view problems, react to others and resolve conflicts as I do, I am in for a real education. People are different. If we understand this fact, then we will take others from where they are, not where we think they should be. We will not take things as personally, and we will not be as frustrated because our expectations of others will be from an educated perspective. Not everyone handles

conflict in the same way. Not everyone creates conflict in the same way. Albert Einstein said, "The problems we face cannot be solved with the same level of thinking that created them." The problem here is conflict. Let's look at it from the level of thinking that created it.

In addition to being a part of our genetic predisposition or heredity, behavior is also learned and developed at a very early age — many behavioral experts think before the age of six. A basic attitude toward others, i.e., whether they should be or can be trusted is developed in our early home environment. Our picture of conflict and our emotional response to it was determined to a large extent by whether confrontation led to the resolution of problems between parents or whether it produced pain and needed to be avoided. According to Virginia Dunstone in her book, *Why I Act the Way I Do*, we have a "contract" with our "child" as an adult to protect and/or maintain the belief system we developed long ago. However, our ability to "reframe" events in our past and what they mean to us can greatly enhance our ability to anticipate and resolve conflicts.

My father drank excessively during my formative years. The choices he made to vent his frustrations in physically violent ways toward my mother determined to a great extent the views and beliefs I formed at a very young age about conflict. Juxtaposed with my introvert temperament, conflict was a thing to be avoided. I had 11 brothers and sisters, and they all respond to conflict out of their own temperaments and unique experiences. Their interpretations of and responses to the same events were in some cases very different. The older brothers, for example, became aggressive and even violent to protect my mother. To them, conflict may have been one of many ways they developed confidence and a sense of internal power. For me, I found myself in a prison of passivity and only through the development of assertiveness skills over the years did I learn that conflict can be an opportunity for growth if you are willing to let your past experiences with conflict be your teacher. The confrontation, however, must be a confrontation of the problem, not the person; and there is a

skill in doing this. When you confront the person, you are placing yourself as judge and jury over the other person, which you have no right to do. Confronting the person implies blame, and blaming damages relationships. It does not solve the problem. Also in some cases we blame ourselves, and this only damages one's self-confidence.

Behavioral Styles

An aggressive behavioral style says, "What's wrong with you?" "Oh, that's smart." "Why did I ever listen to you?" "Anyone with half a brain could figure this out." "Can't you do anything right?" "If you really cared about the company, you wouldn't throw money around the way you do." "It's my way or the highway." The character flaws of this behavioral style are selfishness, insensitivity, and placing their own interests above the interests of others. In other words, they devalue others and have little respect for them. This style of interacting with others insures a negative and defensive response from others. A poem I read many years ago said, "No man is an island. No man stands alone. What we put into the lives of others comes back into our own." The aggressive style of relating demands action and demeans others. "What goes around, comes around," is never truer than in this case. When dealing with this person you must show confidence and place conditions. For example: "I want to hear what you're saying. I'm not willing to be called names." "I'll meet with you at 2:00 when we can talk about it." "When did you begin feeling that I don't care about the company?" "Joe, I'll make a deal with you. I'll show you the respect you deserve if you'll do the same with me." One last point. Demanding action, as mentioned previously, must be replaced by getting agreement on action. That way, the other person does not defend his position or ego but supports the decision to act and if not, then you know where he stands. If you must confront inaction, remember: praise in public, reprimand in private. To confront: "Joe, you must have a good reason for [inaction], may I ask what it is?"

A passive behavioral style says, "Joe is going to be mad if we don't get this

done.” “I wish I could make decisions better.” “If that’s what you want, then I guess so.” “I can’t tell her that! She’ll get mad.” “No, I’m not mad. I’m just tired.” “I thought you wanted me to do it.” “Okay, I’ll cancel it (or I’ll do it) if you want me to, but Sally is sure going to be disappointed.” The character flaws of this behavioral style are dishonesty, irresponsibility and manipulation. The passive person says, “Your rights, opinions, and position are more important than mine, but I’ll make you feel guilty for it.” In this case, they devalue themselves and are more accountable to others than to themselves.

This style of relating prevents clear communication with others and creates frustration for both the sender and receiver. When dealing with Mr. Passivity, it is important to make interaction “safe” for him. For example, “Gene, do you have a problem with the way we are handling this project?” Answer, “No, why?” “I may not have read your response/reaction correctly when I was reviewing this project in the meeting, but I felt like you might have a problem with it.” Answer, “No, I don’t.” “If you did, would you feel comfortable sharing it with me?” Even though we might believe that it is the responsibility of the passive individual to tell us if there is a problem, the reality is that oftentimes they will not be responsible for telling you how they truly feel, and you can save yourself a lot of time and potential conflict by bringing them safely out into the open with what they really think. In doing this you are conditioning them to what you expect in the future. You are, in effect, saying, “Your passivity won’t work with me. I expect our interactions to be open.” And in confronting their passivity, you will have prevented potential conflict that could result from misunderstandings and poor communication.

One of the most destructive behavioral styles is passive/aggressive behavior. It is an attempt to gain power in a subversive or clandestine way. For example, gossip is the sharing of detrimental information with someone who is neither part of the problem nor part of the solution. It is an insidious poison that if left unchecked can destroy a company from within. Gossip

can take on a life of its own and must be confronted. Depending on your relationship with the person who is gossiping, you can use several statements as follows: “I don’t see that person that way at all. Have you spoken to them about this?” “I don’t like talking about others without them being here.” “What is your job? What does this have to do with your job?” People gossip for several reasons: 1. They have been hurt and retaliate in a subversive way through character defamation, i.e., gossip. 2. They attempt to gain approval and acceptance in an artificial way. 3. Habit. They get used to relating to others in this passive/aggressive way. There are two kinds of gossip. Innocent and malicious. Regardless, the damage it can do in both time and space can be devastating. Do not be a conduit to gossip. Confront it at every opportunity and you will prevent conflict from taking root before it is too late to even identify where it comes from. It is important here to point out that conflict that comes from an honest exchange of different views on how to achieve corporate goals or resolve external problems is good. As Stephen Covey says, it can “sharpen the saw.” However, conflict born out of gossip is an unfortunate waste of time and energy. Shared goals and a shared vision throughout an organization are the best anecdote for the poison of gossip, but it’s best to prevent it from ever starting by providing a forum for concerns and complaints, educating employees on the destructive nature of gossip, and confronting it when you hear it.

Another form of passive/aggressive behavior is lying. Some might call this a character defect, but for purposes of this discussion, one way to confront a person you suspect of lying is as follows: “Elaine, I need to talk to you about something I heard you did; and if I’m wrong, I’ll apologize.” [Elaine] “What are you talking about?” “I heard you lied about what Jim said in a meeting last week. Elaine, this is not like you, and I’m disappointed to hear it.” As this person’s supervisor, if you don’t confront her at critical points, you stand the risk of losing the respect of your other direct reports. Another passive/aggressive behavior is work slowdown. This is very much like

confronting the passive person. The key is to bring them out of hiding but make it safe for him or her to be honest with you. How you handle situations like this at critical points also helps build trust. Remember, trust is based on and built on the history of the relationship

The assertive behavioral style requires more skill development for some than with others. However, it is well worth the effort in terms of saving time, frustration and relationships with fellow employees, managers, and spouses. An assertive person basically says, “You have your rights, needs and opinions. So do I. Let’s negotiate.” The assertive person uses “I” vs. “you” language. They get what they want while showing respect and consideration for others. A bank teller refuses to credit your account even though the charge was a bank error. His explanation is that he has to get his supervisor’s okay and she is not in. Your assertive response is “I understand that is a problem for you, but I want that amount credited to my account before I leave.”

The Rules of Conflict Resolution are as follows:

1. Expression of feelings and emotions are encouraged but should not include threats and name-calling.
2. No interrupting the other person.
3. Stay on the same eye level.
4. Make sure you have heard the person correctly before responding.
5. Do not use the words “always,” “never,” “everything,” or “nothing.”
6. Stay in the present tense. Deal with “here and now” issues.
7. Refrain from finger pointing.
8. Take responsibility for your feelings and beliefs/opinions by using “I” statements.
9. Stay on topic.
10. Do not over dramatize. Remain calm.
11. Be honest.
12. Approach the conflict with a problem-solving attitude.
13. Take responsibility for part of the change.

In the final analysis, whether conflict is on an international scale, a corporate scale or within the sacred walls of a marriage, if it is resolved correctly, relationships remain intact and mutual goals have a much better chance of being achieved.