

Learning Package One

What is Conflict and What Does it Look Like in the Workplace?



Image from - <http://www.team-building-techniques.com/workplace-conflict-resolution.html>

In this learning package we will consider the nature of conflict in the workplace as well as its impact on individuals. Conflict is a natural and normal part of any human interaction; there is nothing unusual about conflict in itself. It is what we do about it when it occurs which is important.

We will examine the ways each of us respond and deal with conflict, as well as consider healthy ways to resolve conflict when it occurs. The learning package covers the following material:

- Definitions of workplace conflict
- Features of poorly handled or unresolved conflict
- Features of effectively handled conflict

Conflict will always be present in a workplace and it's important to seek **resolution** not just to contain the issues and forget about them. This learning package provides some strategies and skills to effectively handle conflict.

Conflict can be damaging, and many people actively avoid dealing with situations arising from conflict. However, properly handled, conflict can strengthen our dealings with other people and add to our understandings of others' views or perceptions. In a remote workplace conflict, poorly handled or addressed, can have particularly negative outcomes, as the people we work with are often the same people we socialise with or live near in the community.

Understanding conflict management styles can increase health professionals' positive conflict outcomes and lead to improved relationships, increased job satisfaction, and increased retention of professionals.

Bullying behaviour on the other hand, is always destructive and damaging, and will be separately covered in Learning Package Two.

What is Conflict?

Conflicts are generally defined as relational disputes between two or more parties.

“The clashing of opposed principles” Oxford Dictionary

“Conflict is inevitable in organisational life but it need not have destructive consequences for the organisation (or work group). Depending on how the conflict is managed, the negative effects may be minimised, and positive effects may result from the conflict. Effective conflict management is based, in part, on a solid understanding of the different ways conflict emerges and can be resolved”. *Organisational Behavior* Hellreigel, Slocum and Woodman, 2001 Ninth Edition, South Western Thomson Learning, Singapore

There are several different **types** of conflict; Relationship Conflict; Value Conflict; and Interest Conflict

Relationship Conflict is a personal perspective and can arise when one person behaves in a negative manner or another person has skewed perception due to things like stereotypes and rumors. The relationship between people is affected negatively, and in the workplace, performance is eroded due to poor team cohesion.

Value Conflict arises when two people or groups have dissenting views on moral values-- that basic understanding of what is naturally right or wrong. Relationship and value conflicts are the most subjective conflict types, because they are based totally on what someone "feels" about a person or situation.

Interest Conflict arises when one person's desired outcome is in conflict with another person or group's interests. Typically, this occurs when one person believes that another person's desires, if enacted, will prevent his or her own interests from being met. This type of conflict can be experienced when two people who have relationship conflict are required by a team manager to work as a part of a team.

Features of Poorly Handled or Unresolved Conflict

Unresolved or poorly handled conflict results in

- Sour relationships
- Resentment
- Ill health
- Low productivity
- Unresolved and simmering problems

Features of Effectively Handled Conflict

- Improved Relationships
- Relaxed atmosphere
- Improved communication
- Empowerment
- Efficient problem solving
- High productivity
- A sense of achievement
- Team cohesion

As we learn to handle conflict in a constructive manner we are able to appreciate that disagreeing with others is not always a negative or destructive process. Properly handled, conflict can lead to a healthy sharing of ideas and opinions and can ideally allow us to accommodate new concepts and ideas. Conflicts abound in our everyday life. Most conflict arises out of disagreements with others about how we should behave/act or even think and feel. Conflict is a natural part of life, and without it, we would not challenge each other to do or be better but would merely passively accept what is dished out to us, like robots! More often than not, it's not the conflict that is the problem, but how we choose to deal with it that brings us negative results and damaged relationships.

Most of us have been conditioned to view conflict as an unpleasant thing. However, conflict is the manifestation of how people think and behave according to their different personal and social histories. It also occurs as a response to frustration, and some would say as an expression of aggressive and competitive instincts. Inner conflicts reflect our difficulties in

coming to terms with life's challenges or in accepting ourselves as we truly are (this does not mean that we must put up with how we are!).

The most valuable aspect of conflict is the energy that it generates. Conflict management is not an attempt to suppress this energy, but to use it constructively. Conflict caused by differing viewpoints may lead to harsh and painful situations, or it can be transformed into creative and productive dialogue. Conflict will become easier to manage if we see it as inevitable but not necessarily destructive, and as a problem to be solved rather than a battle to be won.

Exercise One

Observe in your workplace the different types of conflict which typically occur and how other people generally react to that conflict. What type of conflict is most prevalent – Relationship, Value or Interest conflict?

How do you personally react to that conflict? Take notes of your main observations.

How does this differ from conflict you see in other areas of your personal life? Again, record your observations. It can be useful to make a comparison table which details your observations and comparisons.