

## Learning Package Four

# Stages of Conflict Development



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This Learning Package considers the stages in which

- Conflict develops
- Appropriate strategies which can be effectively used at each stage
- External help (Mediation) is best sought
- The features of a win-win approach are summarised.

Being able to identify the stages in which conflict develops (and deteriorates) can be useful in gaining insight into the interventions which may be necessary to properly handle and deal with the situation.

### **Stages of Conflict Development**

Conflict typically occurs in escalating levels of seriousness. In the earlier stages it is easier to deal with the issues which are generated, and solutions are more quickly found. People can often solve their differences with little difficulty at the early stages. At the other end of the spectrum, once conflict has degenerated to a deeply hostile and serious level, external assistance is needed from an external source to mediate a solution with the parties.

Initially, there is the first level in which people typically become aware there is a problem. This level is referred to as the **Discomfort Stage**. Nothing specifically may have happened but there may have been some tensions or awareness that something is “not right” in a relationship. Generally, little is said or done about the problem at this stage as it is not recognised that any problem actually exists. This stage is a part of normal, everyday life. Even good relationships have moments of conflict. In this stage, people look for objective solutions a cooperative manner. If a solution is not found, especially because one of the parties sticks obstinately to his or her point of view, the conflict escalates.

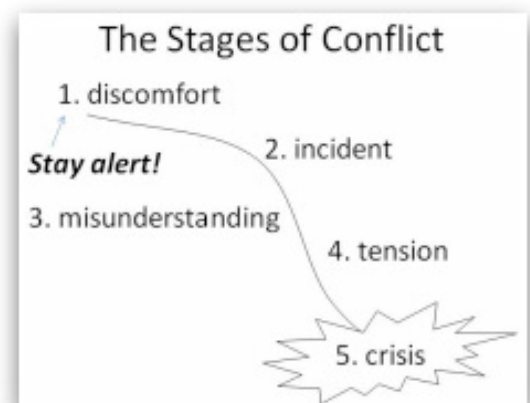
The **Incidents Stage** is the next level of escalation. This is the stage where minor events or incidents occur. In themselves they may be minor, but a negative meaning is attached to these events and the parties are moving from a relatively minor feeling of tension to mistrust. Typically, at this stage things are done or said which give an impression that a problem exists. The parties may feel irritated with each other. They fluctuate between cooperation and competition. They may have common interests, but their own wishes become more important.

Dealing with information becomes limited to that which favours one's own arguments. Logic and understanding are used to convince or win over the opposing side. At this stage, each party does everything possible to not show weakness. The temptation to leave the field of argument increases until the conflict escalates because of some action taken by one of the parties.

If the conflict is not dealt with or is avoided, it can escalate to the next stage; the **Misunderstandings Stage**. At this stage, it is likely misunderstandings have contributed to the problem. There may be confusion about the incidents which have previously occurred and the parties may apply false interpretations to those incidents. Facts may not be clearly presented and may be obscured.

The **Tension Level** follows very quickly as the situation deteriorates, and as a result of the parties viewing each other with deep suspicion. Typically there is a tension to their dealings with each other. At this stage, all behaviours in the relevant parties are viewed through the filter of mistrust and there is little or no trust in the relationships. There may be entrenched negative attitudes toward each other and the parties tend to have fixed positions. At this level the parties each fear that the grounds for a common solution are lost. In other words, they lose hope for a reasonable outcome. Interaction becomes hostile. All logic is focused on action, replacing fruitless and nerve-wracking discussions. Paradoxically, the parties each believe that through pressure they will change the other party. At the same time neither is prepared to yield.

Finally, the situation develops into the **Crisis Level** as the parties reach a stage of outright hostility and it is clear by this time that events have reached a serious stage indeed. This stage is characterised by poor interactions and extreme gestures are contemplated. At this level, stereotyping is applied as negative identification of the opponent. When this level is reached, it is unlikely the parties will be able to resolve the conflict without external, objective and professional assistance.



## **Taking Sides**

It will be observed that at all levels, some people attempt to gather support from friends or colleagues by “taking sides”. Others who are on the periphery of the dispute will become drawn into the conflict as each side persuades others to agree with them. This process is often referred to as “triangulation”. The concept originated in the study of [dysfunctional family](#) systems, but can describe behaviours in other systems as well, including the workplace. Triangulation can also be used to describe a form of ["splitting"](#) in which one person seeks the support of a third person against one that he or she is upset about. This is playing the two people against each other, but usually the person doing the splitting, will also engage in [character assassination](#).

When conflict occurs in the workplace, be vigilant about not being drawn into the dispute as this invariably only worsens the situation and makes resolution more complex.

## **Appropriate Strategies at Each Level**

### **Discomfort Level**

At this level, it is easiest to deal with and head off the issues, by speaking directly with the other party to establish if there is a problem. Good will is established by being prepared to address the issue.

### **Incidents Level**

When incidents happen, and it appears there may be a developing issue causing irritation or frustration, it is still possible to intervene successfully by raising the issue with the other party. This is best done in an open and non-confrontational manner, with an opening statement that a solution is being sought. It can be helpful to say something like “I would like to discuss what is happening as it appears there is a problem”. It is important that a non-judgmental stance is taken. More strategies will be presented in Learning Package Seven (Assertive Communication)

### **Misunderstandings Level**

Effective strategies at this level of conflict escalation include one or more of the parties involved clarifying what might be happening. It can be useful to ask questions such as “When

you said that, what did you mean?” or any question which can shed light on the nature of the problem. The focus here is on clearing up any confusion around the issue. If the issues are in fact clear and are not in any way confused, at least the extent of the problem is understood. At this stage it may be appropriate to apologise for any personal contribution you may have made to the problem and then close the matter.

### **Tension Level**

By this level of escalation, the issues in dispute have become more severe in nature and it is hard for people to be objective enough to discuss the matter in an open and constructive manner. It may help to call upon a trusted and impartial manager or someone from nearby to the work unit to assist. Such a person will informally mediate, and may speak separately to each person in the dispute. This can often resolve misunderstandings or set some boundaries to the situation. For this person’s intervention to be successful they must be acceptable to all parties involved in the dispute.

### **Crisis Level**

At this level the most effective intervention is to call on the services of an external mediator who will work with the parties and assist them to find a workable solution.

It is very difficult for people who are at this level of escalation in a conflict to be sufficiently objective and sufficiently clear headed to work on and arrive at a resolution.

Often at this stage, one or more parties in a workplace resign or ask for a transfer away from the location. While this may be a form of resolution it leaves lingering resentments and frustration with those people involved in the dispute, and prevents people learning from the process. It may, however, be the best solution when an individual’s resources are not equal to dealing with a toxic situation.

### **Mediation**

When the parties are unable to resolve a dispute it may be useful to call on the services of an external mediator who can objectively work with the parties to resolve the issues. An experienced mediator can work with groups as well as individuals to mediate a resolution.

However, for mediation to be effective, each individual involved in the process must be committed to the process and willing to contribute to a resolution.

Typically, a mediator will be called upon to assist when the parties have reached a crisis point. But it is preferable for this intervention to be used at an earlier stage in the conflict – before the situation has deteriorated to a crisis level. It is recognised that when the workforce is in a remote locality it can be difficult to resource a skilled mediator.

A mediator will ask each individual to reflect upon the contribution they made to the dispute and how they see themselves contributing to the solution.

Mediation is rarely suitable when bullying or violent behaviours have been experienced.

### **Features of the win/win approach**

There are some features which are common to successful resolutions. A wealth of research and studies has been undertaken in the area of conflict resolution and are summarised in the following section. It is important we: -

- Concentrate on approach not outcome
- Focus on issues/needs not solutions
- Hard on issues, easy on the person
- Be willing to fix the problem
- Maintain an attitude of respect
- Consider the negative consequences of win/lose
- Re-define what constitutes a 'win'
- Make it easy to say yes
- Resist greed and injustice
- Take a long term view
- Maintain dialogue
- Keep generating possibilities

**ABOVE ALL - BE POSITIVE AND PERSISTENT**

#### **Exercise Four**

Carefully note in your own workplace how often you see examples of each stage of conflict. Observe whether early stage conflict is dealt with effectively, or does the conflict escalate before it is dealt with? Especially note if there are times when conflict is dealt with at an early stage, which strategies are used by those involved. If such instances do not occur, analyse at which point early intervention may have been usefully employed, and what difference that may have made.

There is an additional exercise you may wish to undertake. With a partner, discuss how the conflict development stages applied to a conflict you had in the past. With the benefit of hindsight, how might the conflict have been managed better by intervening at an earlier stage?