

Learning Package Five

A Model for Conflict Handling



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This Learning Package presents a Five Stage model for managing conflict. In preparation for adopting this model it is critical you commit to a successful outcome which benefits all parties. Ask yourself what you may have brought to the problem and what you can bring to the solution.

As discussed in previous sections of this Module, people bring to any model of conflict resolution their own personality, their value system and learned behaviours. The model presented here encourages you to be aware of those cultural factors in the way you adopt the process.

The model is best used in the early stages of conflict, but will assist at all levels. If the conflict has reached a crisis level, it is suggested you seek the assistance of an external mediator.

A Model in Five Stages

Stage One: Define the Conflict

There are several techniques which help to define the problem.

- Define both content and relationship issues
- Define the problem in specific terms
- Focus on the present (not past issues or grudges)
- Empathise with the other party
- Avoid mind reading.

An analysis of the problem will allow you to clarify exactly what is happening, rather than what you fear may be happening. Ask yourself what the other party/parties may see as the problem. If you can identify what the other point of view is, it is possible to tackle the issue from their point of view. Some clarifying questions put to the other party can be useful, such as “What do you feel is the problem?”

By focusing on the present you stay focused on the current issues, and not past grudges or frustrations. Try not to bring up past hurts or other topics.

Stage Two: Examine Possible Solutions

- Brainstorm
- Try not to inhibit or censure the other party/ies
- Look for win-win solutions
- Weigh the costs and rewards of each solution
- Seek solutions in which costs and rewards are equally balanced

In this stage there is an assessment of all feasible solutions. It can be helpful to enlist the help of trusted others to generate outcomes which you may not have otherwise considered. Try to focus on those solutions which deliver an outcome for both sides of the conflict. It can be useful also to consider the likely benefits from reaching a resolution.

Stage Three: Test the Solution

- Test the solution mentally
 - How does it feel now?
 - How will it feel in future?
 - Are you comfortable with it?
- Test the solution in practice
 - How does it work? Give each possible solution a fair chance.

By mentally projecting the application of a solution, it is likely obstacles to achieving resolution may become apparent. Consider alternative solutions and consider their likely success. Testing the solution may take time, and certainly requires a commitment from all relevant parties if solutions are to have a fair chance of working.

Stage Four: Evaluate the Solution

Examine the outcome from these angles:

- The facts
- How you feel about the outcome
- Negative argument
- What positive benefits have been achieved
- Are there other ways you can look at the problem? Are there any creative solutions?
- Has the problem been adequately defined?

In the evaluation stage, you are considering how well the solution has worked and considering alternative solutions.

Stage Five: Accept or Reject Solutions

- Accepted
 - Put it into more permanent operation
- Rejected
 - Discard it and try another solution

After the conflict has been resolved, if the correct solution has not been found, it is likely other conflicts will be generated. Learn from the conflict and from the process. Try to keep the conflict in perspective, as it is very tempting, when emotions are high, to exaggerate the situation.

The important aspect of this model is to plan ahead what you will do and say when tackling the issues. Plan the best location for the conversation to take place, preferably where you will have privacy and time to give to the process.

In using this model it is important to:

- Tackle the issues and not the person. By changing the focus to the relevant issues you can separate the problem from the people involved, allowing a more objective and less threatening approach
- Be non-judgemental at all stages and avoid using angry or accusing words
- Be willing to acknowledge the other point of view
- Try to stay calm. It is hard for others to maintain their anger when dealing with a calm response. Note: There are times when it is appropriate to be angry – but ensure you choose those times carefully.

Cultural Differences in Conflict Resolution

Culture is determined by our upbringing, ethnicity, values, race, religion, age and even gender. In organisations, cultural differences can exist between sections of the work unit or levels of management. It is inevitable that culture will shape our attitudes, including how we

deal with relationships and conflict Cultural differences may complicate our responses to conflict and make outcomes difficult to predict.

Given culture's important role in conflicts, what should be done to keep it in mind and include it in response plans? Unless we develop comfort with culture as an integral part of conflict, we may find ourselves tangled in its net of complexity, limited by our own cultural background and understandings. Cultural awareness is a key tool for disentangling and managing cultural conflicts.

Cultural awareness means familiarity with cultures: their natures, how they work, and ways it may interact with our relationships in times of both conflict and harmony. Cultural awareness means sensitivity to several dimensions of culture, including:

- Communication,
- Ways of naming, framing, and taming conflict,
- Approaches to meaning making,
- Identities and roles.

How this works in practice will depend on the situation and people involved. It would be rash to stipulate a formula for such a complex and multi-layered issue, but rather to urge caution and care when engaging in conflict resolution across cultural boundaries. That care and caution is framed around the above four dimensions of culture. It is also necessary to constantly strengthen communication to ensure people are clear about their intent and the message gets through, without the distorting effect of cultural difference.

Exercise Five

Reflect on a past low-level conflict which you experienced with another person, and determine how using this model might have led to a more successful outcome for both you and the other party. If you are currently experiencing conflict with someone, consider how this approach may assist to determine a possible solution.