

SMR Forum: Managing Conflict

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While conflict is not necessarily "bad," or something that should be squelched (it is inherent in organizational life), it can impair relationships among people who need to interact effectively. Therefore, conflict needs to be managed. The author synthesizes much of the diverse writing on conflict management and presents a useful model that can help people diagnose a conflict situation and thus plan tactics for managing it. Ed.

Managers or change agents spend a substantial proportion of their time and energy dealing with conflict situations. Such efforts are necessary because any type of change in an organization tends to generate conflict. More specifically, conflict arises because change disrupts the existing balance of resources and power, thereby straining relations between the people involved. Since adversarial relations may impede the process of making adaptive changes in the organization, higher-level managers may have to intervene in order to implement important strategies. Their effectiveness in managing the conflict depends on how well they understand the underlying dynamics of the conflict — which may be very different from its expression — and whether they can identify the crucial tactical points for intervention.

Conflict Management

Conflict is managed when it does not substantially interfere with the ongoing functional (as opposed to personal) relationships between the parties involved. For instance, two executives may agree to disagree on a number of issues and yet be jointly committed to the course of action they have settled on. There may even be some residual hard feelings — perhaps it is too much to expect to manage feelings in addition to relationships — but as long as any resentment is at a fairly low level and does not substantially interfere with other aspects of their professional relationship, the conflict could be considered to have been managed successfully.

Conflict is not an objective, tangible phenomenon; rather, it exists in the minds of the people who are party to it. Only its manifes-

tations, such as brooding, arguing, or fighting, are objectively real. To manage conflict, therefore, one needs to empathize, that is, to understand the situation as it is seen by the key actors involved. An important element of conflict management is persuasion, which may well involve getting participants to rethink their current views so their perspective on the situation will facilitate reconciliation rather than divisiveness.

Influencing key actors' conceptions of the conflict situation can be a powerful lever in making conflicts manageable. This approach can be used by a third party intervening in the conflict or, even more usefully, by the participants themselves. But using this perceptual lever alone will not always be sufficient. The context in which the conflict occurs, the history of the relationship between the parties, and the time available will have to be taken into account if such an approach is to be tailored to the situation. Furthermore, the conflict may prove to be simply unmanageable: one or both parties may wish to prolong the conflict or they may have reached emotional states that make constructive interaction impossible; or, perhaps the conflict is "the tip of the iceberg" and resolving it would have no significant impact on a deeply rooted antagonistic relationship.

Table 1 presents seven perceptual dimensions that form a useful diagnostic model that shows what to look for in a conflict situation and pinpoints the dimensions needing high-priority attention. The model can thus be used to illuminate a way to make the conflict more manageable. The point here is that conflict becomes more negotiable between parties when a minimum number of dimensions are perceived to be at the "difficult-to-resolve" pole and a maximum number to be at the "easy-to-resolve" pole.

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The objective is to shift a viewpoint from the difficult-to-resolve pole to the easy-to-resolve one. At times, antagonists will deliberately resist "being more reasonable" because they see tactical advantages in taking a hard line. Nevertheless, there are strong benefits for trying to shift perspectives; these benefits should become apparent as we consider each of the dimensions in the model.

Issues in Question

People view issues on a continuum from being a matter of principle to a question of division. For example, one organization needed to change its channel of distribution. The company had sold door-to-door since its founding, but the labor market was drying up and the sales force was becoming increasingly understaffed. Two factions of executive sprung up: the supporters were open to the needed change; the resisters argued that management made a commitment to the remaining sales force and, as a matter of principle, could not violate the current sales representatives' right to be the exclusive channel of distribution.

Raising principles makes conflict difficult to resolve because by definition one cannot come to a reasonable compromise: one either upholds a principle or sacrifices one's integrity. For some issues, particularly those involving ethical imperatives, such a dichotomous view may be justified. Often, however, matters of principle are raised for the purpose of solidifying a bargaining stance. Yet, this tactic may work against the party using it since it tends to invite an impasse. Once matters of principle are raised, the parties try to argue convincingly that the other's point of view is wrong. At best, this approach wastes time and saps the energy of the parties involved. A useful intervention at this point may be to have the parties acknowledge that they understand each other's view but still believe in their own, equally legitimate point of view. This acknowledgment alone often makes the parties more ready to move ahead from arguing to problem solving.

At the other extreme are divisible issues

where neither side has to give in completely; the outcome may more or less favor both parties. In the door-to-door selling example, a more constructive discussion would have ensued had the parties been able to focus on the economic commitment the company had to its sales force, rather than on the moral commitment. As it was, the factions remained deadlocked until the company had suffered irrevocable losses in market share, which served no one's interests. Divisible issues in this case might have involved how much of the product line would be sold through alternative channels of distribution, the extent of exclusive territory, or how much income protection the company was willing to offer its sales force.

Size of Stakes

The greater the perceived value of what may be lost, the harder it is to manage a conflict. This point is illustrated when managers fight against acquisition attempts. If managers think their jobs are in jeopardy, they subjectively perceive the stakes as being high and are likely to fight tooth and nail against the acquisition. Contracts providing for continued economic security, so-called golden parachutes, reduce the size of the stakes for those potentially affected. Putting aside the question of whether such contracts are justifiable when viewed from other perspectives, they do tend to make acquisition conflicts more manageable.

In many cases the perceived size of the stakes can be reduced by persuasion rather than by taking concrete action. People tend to become emotionally involved in conflicts and as a result magnify the importance of what is really at stake. Their "egos" get caught up in the winning/losing aspect of the conflict, and subjective values become inflated.

A good antidote is to postpone the settlement until the parties become less emotional. During this cooling-off period they can reevaluate the issues at stake, thereby restoring some objectivity to their assessments. If time does not permit a cooling off, an attempt to reassess the demands and re-

Table 1 Conflict Diagnostic Model

Dimension	Viewpoint Continuum	
	Difficult to Resolve	Easy to Resolve
Issue in Question	Matter of Principle	Divisible Issue
Size of Stakes	Large	Small
Interdependence of the Parties	Zero Sum	Positive Sum
Continuity of Interaction	Single Transaction	Long-term Relationship
Structure of the Parties	Amorphous or Fractionalized, with Weak Leadership	Cohesive, with Strong Leadership
Involvement of Third Parties	No Neutral Third Party Available	Trusted, Powerful, Prestigious, and Neutral
Perceived Progress of the Conflict	Unbalanced: One Party Feeling the More Harmed	Parties Having Done Equal Harm to Each Other

duce the other party's expectations may be possible: "There's no way we can give you 100 percent of what you want, so let's be realistic about what you can live with." This approach is really an attempt to induce an attitude change. In effect, the person is being persuaded to entertain the thought, "If I can get by with less than 100 percent of what I was asking for, then what is at stake must not be of paramount importance to me."

A special case of the high-stakes/low-stakes question is the issue of precedents. If a particular settlement sets a precedent, the stakes are seen as being higher because future conflicts will tend to be settled in terms of the current settlement. In other words, giving ground in the immediate situation is seen as giving ground for all time. This problem surfaces in settling grievances. Thus, an effective way to manage such a conflict is to emphasize the uniqueness of the situation to downplay possible precedents that could be

set. Similarly, the perceived consequences of organizational changes for individuals can often be softened by explicitly downplaying the future consequences: employees are sometimes assured that the change is being made "on an experimental basis" and will later be reevaluated. The effect is to reduce the perceived risk in accepting the proposed change.

Interdependence of the Parties

The parties to a conflict can view themselves on a continuum from having "zero-sum" to "positive-sum" interdependence. Zero-sum interdependence is the perception that if one party gains in an interaction, it is at the expense of the other party. In the positive-sum case, both parties come out ahead by means of a settlement. A zero-sum relationship makes conflict difficult to resolve because it focuses attention narrowly on personal gain rather than on mutual gain through collaboration or problem solving.

Consider the example of conflict over the allocation of limited budget funds among sales and production when a new product line is introduced. The sales group fights for a large allocation to promote the product in order to build market share. The production group fights for a large allocation to provide the plant and equipment necessary to turn out high volume at high-quality levels. The funds available have a fixed ceiling, so that a gain for sales appears to be a loss for production and vice versa. From a zero-sum perspective, it makes sense to fight for the marginal dollar rather than agree on a compromise.

A positive-sum view of the same situation removes some of the urgency to win a larger share of the spoils at the outset. Attention is more usefully focused on how one party's allocation in fact helps the other. Early promotion allocations to achieve high sales volume, if successful, lead to high production volume. This, in turn, generates revenue that can be invested in the desired improvements to plant and equipment. Similarly, initial allocations to improve plant and equipment can make a high-quality product

readily available to the sales group, and the demand for a high-quality product will foster sales.

The potential for mutual benefit is often overlooked in the scramble for scarce resources. However, if both parties can be persuaded to consider how they can both benefit from a situation, they are more likely to approach the conflict over scarce resources with more cooperative predispositions. The focus shifts from whether one party is getting a fair share of the available resources to what is the optimum initial allocation that will jointly serve the mutual long-run interests of both sales and production.

Continuity of Interaction

The continuity-of-interaction dimension concerns the time horizon over which the parties see themselves dealing with each other. If they visualize a long-term interaction — a continuous relationship — the present transaction takes on minor significance, and the conflict within that transaction tends to be easy to resolve. If, on the other hand, the transaction is viewed as a one-shot deal — an episodic relationship — the parties will have little incentive to accommodate each other, and the conflict will be difficult to resolve.

This difference in perspective is seen by contrasting how lawyers and managers approach a contract dispute. Lawyers are trained to perceive the situation as a single episode: the parties go to court, and the lawyers make the best possible case for their party in an attempt to achieve the best possible outcome. This is a "no-holds-barred" interaction in which the past and future interaction between the parties tends to be viewed as irrelevant. Thus the conflict between the parties is not really resolved; rather, an outcome is imposed by the judge.

In contrast, managers are likely to be more accommodating when the discussion of a contract is viewed as one interaction within a longer-term relationship that has both a history and a future. In such a situation, a manager is unlikely to resort to no-holds-barred tactics because he or she will have to face the other party again regarding future

deals. Furthermore, a continuous relationship permits the bankrolling of favors: "We helped you out on that last problem; it's your turn to work with us on this one."

Here, it is easy, and even cordial, to remind the other party that a continuous relationship exists. This tactic works well because episodic situations are rare in real-world business transactions. For instance, people with substantial business experience know that a transaction is usually not completed when a contract is signed. No contract can be comprehensive enough to provide unambiguously for all possible contingencies. Thus trust and goodwill remain important long after the contract is signed. The street-fighting tactics that may seem advantageous in the context of an episodic orientation are likely to be very costly to the person who must later seek accommodation with the bruised and resentful other party.

Structure of the Parties

Conflict is easier to resolve when a party has a strong leader who can unify his or her constituency to accept and implement the agreement. If the leadership is weak, rebellious subgroups who may not feel obliged to go along with the overall agreement that has been reached are likely to rise up, thereby making conflict difficult to resolve.

For example, people who deal with unions know that a strong leadership tends to be better than a weak one, especially when organizational change needs to be accomplished. A strongly led union may drive a hard bargain, but once an agreement is reached the deal is honored by union members. If a weakly led union is involved, the agreement may be undermined by factions within the union who may not like some of the details. The result may well be chronic resistance to change or even wildcat strikes. To bring peace among such factions, management may have to make further concessions that may be costly. To avoid this, managers may find themselves in a paradoxical position of needing to boost the power of union leaders.

Similar actions may be warranted when

there is no union. Groups of employees often band together as informal coalitions to protect their interests in times of change. Instead of fighting or alienating a group, managers who wish to bring about change may benefit from considering ways to formalize the coalition, such as by appointing its opinion leader to a task force or steering committee. This tactic may be equivalent to cooptation, yet there is likely to be a net benefit to both the coalition and management. The coalition benefits because it is given a formal channel in which the opinion leader's viewpoint is expressed; management benefits because the spokesperson presents the conflict in a manageable form, which is much better than passive resistance or subtle sabotage.

Involvement of Third Parties

People tend to become emotionally involved in conflicts. Such involvement can have several effects: perceptions may become distorted, nonrational thought processes and arguments may arise, and unreasonable stances, impaired communication, and personal attacks may result. These effects make the conflict difficult to resolve.

The presence of a third party, even if the third party is not actively involved in the dialogue, can constrain such effects. People usually feel obliged to appear reasonable and responsible because they care more about how the neutral party is evaluating them than by how the opponent is. The more prestigious, powerful, trusted, and neutral the third party, the greater is the desire to exercise emotional restraint.

While managers often have to mediate conflicts among lower-level employees, they are rarely seen as being neutral. Therefore, consultants and change agents often end up serving a mediator role, either by design or default. This role can take several forms, ranging from an umpire supervising communication to a messenger between parties for whom face-to-face communication has become too strained. Mediation essentially involves keeping the parties interacting in a reasonable and constructive manner. Typically, however, most managers are reluctant

to enlist an outsider who is a professional mediator or arbitrator, for it is very hard for them to admit openly that they are entangled in a serious conflict, much less one they cannot handle themselves.

When managers remain involved in settling disputes, they usually take a stronger role than mediators: they become arbitrators rather than mediators. As arbitrators, they arrive at a conflict-resolving judgment after hearing each party's case. In most business conflicts, mediation is preferable because the parties are helped to come to an agreement in which they have some psychological investment. Arbitration tends to be more of a judicial process in which the parties make the best possible case to support their position: this tends to further polarize rather than reconcile differences.

Managers can benefit from a third-party presence, however, without involving dispute-resolution professionals per se. For example, they can introduce a consultant into the situation, with an explicit mission that is not conflict intervention. The mere presence of this neutral witness will likely constrain the disputants' use of destructive tactics.

Alternatively, if the managers find that they themselves are party to a conflict, they can make the conflict more public and produce the same constraining effect that a third party would. They also can arrange for the presence of relatively uninvolved individuals during interactions; even having a secretary keep minutes of such interactions encourages rational behavior. If the content of the discussion cannot be disclosed to lower-level employees, a higher-level manager can be invited to sit in on the discussion, thereby discouraging dysfunctional personal attacks and unreasonable stances. To the extent that managers can be trusted to be evenhanded, a third-party approach can facilitate conflict management. Encouraging accommodation usually is preferable to imposing a solution that may only produce resentment of one of the parties.

Progress of the Conflict

It is difficult to manage conflict when the

parties are not ready to achieve a reconciliation. Thus it is important to know whether the parties believe that the conflict is escalating. The following example illustrates this point.

During a product strategy meeting, a marketing vice-president carelessly implied that the R&D group tended to overdesign products. The remark was intended to be a humorous stereotyping of the R&D function, but it was interpreted by the R&D vice-president as an attempt to pass on to his group the blame for an uncompetitive product. Later in the meeting, the R&D vice-president took advantage of an opportunity to point out that the marketing vice-president lacked the technical expertise to understand a design limitation. The marketing vice-president perceived this rejoinder as ridicule and therefore as an act of hostility. The R&D vice-president, who believed he had evened the score, was quite surprised to be denounced subsequently by the marketing vice-president, who in turn thought he was evening the score for the uncalled-for barb. These events soon led to a memo war, backbiting, and then to pressure on various employees to take sides.

The important point here is that from the first rejoinder neither party wished to escalate the conflict; each wished merely to even the score. Nonetheless, conflict resolution would have been very difficult to accomplish during this escalation phase because people do not like to disengage when they think they still "owe one" to the other party. Since an even score is subjectively defined, however, the parties need to be convinced that the overall score is approximately equal and that everyone has already suffered enough.

Developing Conflict Management Skills

Strategic decision making usually is portrayed as a unilateral process. Decision makers have some vision of where the organization needs to be headed, and they decide on the nature and timing of specific actions to achieve tangible goals. This portrayal, how-

ever, does not take into account the conflict inherent in the decision-making process; most strategic decisions are negotiated solutions to conflicts among people whose interests are affected by such decisions. Even in the uncommon case of a unilateral decision, the decision maker has to deal with the conflict that arises when he or she moves to implement the decision.

In the presence of conflict at the decision-making or decision-implementing stage, managers must focus on generating an agreement rather than a decision. A decision without agreement makes the strategic direction difficult to implement. By contrast, an agreement on a strategic direction doesn't require an explicit decision. In this context, conflict management is the process of removing cognitive barriers to agreement. Note that agreement does not imply that the conflict has "gone away." The people involved still have interests that are somewhat incompatible. Agreement implies that these people have become committed to a course of action that serves some of their interests.

People make agreements that are less than ideal from the standpoint of serving their interests when they lack the power to force others to fully comply with their wishes. On the other hand, if a manager has total power over those whose interests are affected by the outcome of a strategic decision, the manager may not care whether or not others agree, because total power implies total compliance. There are few situations in real life in which managers have influence that even approaches total power, however, and power solutions are at best unstable since most people react negatively to powerlessness *per se*. Thus it makes more sense to seek agreements than to seek power. Furthermore, because conflict management involves weakening or removing barriers to agreements, managers must be able to diagnose successfully such barriers. The model summarized in Table 1 identifies the primary cognitive barriers to agreement.

Competence in understanding the barriers to an agreement can be easily honed by making a pastime of conflict diagnosis. The

model helps to focus attention on specific aspects of the situation that may pose obstacles to successful conflict management. This pastime transforms accounts of conflicts — from sources ranging from a spouse's response to "how was your day?" to the evening news — into a challenge in which the objective is to try to pinpoint the obstacles to agreement and to predict the success of proposed interventions.

Focusing on the underlying dynamics of the conflict makes it more likely that conflict management will tend toward resolution rather than the more familiar response of suppression. Although the conflict itself — that is, the source — will remain alive, at best, its expression will be postponed until

some later occasion; at worst, it will take a less obvious and usually less manageable form.

Knowledge of and practice in using the model is only a starting point for managers and change agents. Their development as professionals requires that conflict management become an integral part of their use of power. Power is a most basic facet of organizational life, yet inevitably it generates conflict because it constricts the autonomy of those who respond to it. Anticipating precisely how the use of power will create a conflict relationship provides an enormous advantage in the ability to achieve the desired levels of control with minimal dysfunctional side effects.

Effective Communication

A "you-message" is a statement about the other person that is judgmental or evaluative in nature. The mistaken theory behind a "you-message" is that criticism and blame will produce sufficient guilt or fear to cause the person to change behavior. "You-messages" nearly always contain one of the Communication Roadblocks and contain very little (if any) information about the needs and feelings of the person sending the "you-message."

Examples of ineffective "you-messages" include:

"You fool, don't you know better than that?"

"You really shouldn't neglect your work that way."

"You're making life very difficult for me."

"You'd better change that attitude if you want to get ahead in this company."

"Your problem is that you just don't listen very well."

"You-messages" nearly always point the finger of blame, diminish the esteem or worthiness of the receiver, and suggest or impose the kind of change that should take place. People who are on the receiving end of "you messages" generally react defensively, including: aggression, withdrawal, denial, or resentful submission. All of these reactions tend to damage your relationship with the other person. The "you-message," then, fails to meet the goals of effective confrontation, namely volunteered, non-resentful change that preserves the quality of the relationship and the other person's self-esteem.

Effective (constructive) confrontation can be achieved through the use of "I-messages." Unlike a "you-message," the "I-message" focuses on your (the sender's) feelings and unmet needs rather than on a critical judgment of the other person. The goal of an "I-message" is to bring about a change in behavior while maintaining the other's self-esteem. "I-messages" do minimal, if any, damage to the relationship, particularly if you take active steps to strengthen and enhance the relationship. These steps include Active Listening to help handle possible defensive reactions to the "I-message;" fully pursuing the confrontation to a conclusion (avoiding "hit and run" messages); and sharing true feelings and concerns with the other person. Unlike the "you-message," the "I-message" contains no direct suggestion or demand for the way in which the other person must change. This freedom allows the other to choose any number of ways to respond and thus gain the internal satisfaction of being helpful. A summary of the advantages and benefits of the "I-message" include:

- **Models honesty and openness** so that the other person will also find it safe and desirable to be honest and open.
- **Responsibility for behavioral change is kept with the other person** because the other person has the opportunity to be helpful in a variety of ways.

- **You get your needs met** while, at the same time, the self-esteem of the other person being confronted is preserved and the relationship is strengthened.
- The **“I-message” helps the other learn the effects of his/her behavior on you**; behavior change can then be initiated out of consideration for you rather than through coercion.
- **You (the owner of the problem) can ventilate feelings** and the person being confronted is helped to better understand how you are being affected.

The ideal “I-message” includes these three elements:

1. Non-blameful and specific description of the other’s behavior.

The other receives a clear idea of what he/she had done, without creating excessive defensiveness.

A specific rather than a general description is most effective.

Blame-loaded words are avoided.

2. Description of the concrete and tangible effects on you.

If the other can understand the effect on you of his or her behavior, the other is more likely to consider changing.

This element helps the message sender avoid the errors of being judgmental, moralistic, or the “It’s for your own good” stance.

3. Congruent expression of feelings.

A clear and honest expression of your feelings is the fuel of the “I-message,” by allowing the other to hear and feel the intensity of your concern.

Expressing your true underlying feelings displays your need for the other’s help.

Your openness encourages openness from the other and displays your trust and willingness to share feelings with the other.

The preferred order of these three “I-messages” elements is **1) behavior, 2) effects, and 3) feelings**. In this manner, the receiver of the message is made aware of the relationship between his/her behavior and some tangible and undesirable effect on you, and that it is this negative effect that has created your feelings.

Because of your unique manner of expression, you may find it more natural to re-order the three “I-messages” elements. Any sequence is acceptable that includes all three elements delivered in an emotionally congruent manner.

EXAMPLES OF GOOD "I-MESSAGES":

BEHAVIOR	EFFECTS	FEELINGS
When you come in at 8:30 and leave at 4:00...	those project reports may not be finished on time and...	that really worries me.
That volume on your radio...	makes it hard for me to concentrate on this assignment...	and that's very frustrating to me.
When you make a personnel change in my department without consulting me...	it throws off my production schedules for the week and makes my work much harder...	and I really resent that.

Winning Team Play

What to Do About Conflicts?

Team building isn't a new idea, but it is a concept reborn, and conflict is certainly a part of it. As in any relationship, differences will occur in teams, perhaps even more, because there are usually more than two people involved.

Too often, when differences occur in team meetings, they are simply smoothed over by the leader or other members. Of course, in these cases the conflict doesn't dissipate; it just simmers until a later date. The only thing accomplished is the gradual building up of resentment between the members. Because managing conflict is a necessary part of high-performance team building, you need to consider the relationship between team building and conflict.

DECISION MAKING: VOTING VS. CONSENSUS

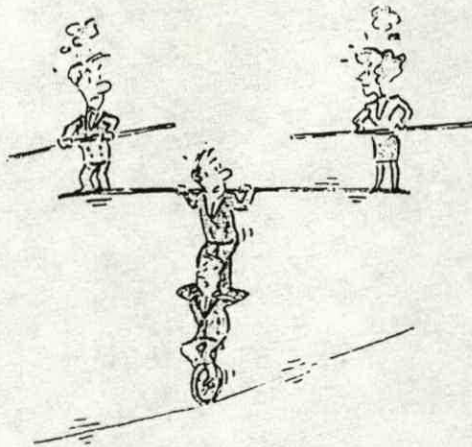
When teams are allowed to make their own decisions, there are two possibilities: voting or consensus.

1. Voting. Although voting is quicker, it can help promote division within the team. When there is a vote on decisions, there are winners and losers. In teams, the idea is for everyone to agree on the decision.

2. Consensus. Reaching consensus is more difficult than voting, but it is the preferred approach to team-building decisions. It does, of course, take longer, and differences will occur in the process. But in the end, everyone supports the final decision.

MEMBERSHIP

Being a member of a team is not easy for a lot of us, especially if we're accustomed to making decisions on our own. When you become a team player, you enter into an interdependent relationship. You may even feel you're giving up your individuality. In



one sense you are, but in another sense you are making an individual contribution to a group effort that usually produces a greater end result than you could have achieved on your own.

Consider the following elements of team membership dynamics.

1. Participation. As a team member, you are expected to participate in a balanced manner; that is, not to be dominant or withdrawn, and at the same time help others to maintain their own balance.

2. Selling. You probably feel your ideas are great. Sometimes they are. Your responsibility as a team member is to prepare ahead of time, whenever possible, and to present your ideas in a logical way to show the team "What's in It for Them (WIIFT)?" You also need to be able to defend your position with logic rather than emotion.

3. Relinquishing. This is the big one. What if you sell to the best of your ability, but the team won't buy? This is the point where the rest of the team discovers what kind of team player you really are. Your responsibility at this point is to relinquish your position even though you really believe yours is the better idea. Not only do you need to give it up, you

must also be willing to support and even defend the team's direction in favor of your own. It's not easy, but as a team player it's the whole that counts, not an individual part.

4. Evaluating. After a team project is completed, each member is responsible for participating in a group evaluation. What worked? What could have been done better? How could it be done differently next time? However, under no circumstances are the words, "I told you so..." ever to cross any member's lips in the evaluation process.

5. Relationship. As a team member, you are responsible for your relationship with other team members. If there is a personal conflict, it is up to you to do what you can to resolve a conflict. Personal conflicts in team efforts fracture and sometimes totally prevent task accomplishment.

6. Task Accomplishment. When acting as a team member, it is critical that you are clear on your task responsibility. This includes what you have to do, when it has to be done by, and any steps in between. In an interdependent relationship, one member's failure can trigger the delay of others' efforts and affect the outcome of the entire team. Being a good team player isn't easy. Bringing excess baggage, using hidden agendas, or protecting authorship of personal ideas all serve to prevent the group from moving toward its goal. You can better serve yourself and the other members if you focus on what's best for the team rather than yourself.

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Dealing with Opposition to Your Ideas

One of the most common impediments to communicating freely in a group is the defensiveness of people whose ideas and suggestions are being evaluated and perhaps disagreed with, in whole or in part. You've seen defensive, self-protective behavior many times. You've probably experienced it in yourself on occasion. The pulse quickens, heat and color flood the face, palms sweat, the voice rises in pitch and perhaps in volume. These are very natural reactions when one feels attacked or discounted in any way.

The chief problem with defensiveness is that it usually hampers one's ability to listen and to think through what others are saying. Ideally, when an idea is discussed, its originator believes that what will eventually emerge is an idea that is tested and even strengthened. That's often true unless the group has to spend much of its time debating with the originator, who worries that his or her idea is being mangled, misunderstood, and mutilated.

You can train yourself to deal constructively with resistance and disagreement. Of course, it's much easier to do so when you are a member of a supportive and sympathetic group. But if you believe that your idea can stand the rigors of close and thoughtful examination, follow these five suggestions to help you deal with opposition:

1. RELAX. Easily said, not so easily done. Sit back in your chair. Keep your facial expression attentive. Don't frown. Don't shake your head. When you look relaxed, even though inside you may not be, you look confident. You also invite people to discuss your idea openly. And that's valuable to you, because you learn what the others are thinking. If you wish to rebut their criticism or analysis, you're get-



ting the ammunition to do so. On the other hand, when you're relaxed, your filters are open, and you may actually pick up some valuable tips on how to improve your idea.

2. LISTEN. Maintain eye contact. Again, keep your facial expression attentive, showing that you value what is being said. Remain seated back in your chair. If you lean forward, you may look as though you are about to pounce on the person evaluating your idea. Don't interrupt while others are talking unless it is quite clear to you that they have misconstrued your idea and are wasting valuable discussion time talking about something you did not mean.

3. ACCEPT. You don't have to agree with whatever criticism is leveled at your idea, but you'd better accept that the people leveling it take their criticism seriously. You want to be careful not to make statements that appear to be put-downs or ridicule. Avoid, for example, such statements as, "How in the world did you come to that conclusion?" or "Come on, you're really reaching." Sometimes you might even blurt out, "That's ridiculous." Then the fight may be on.

Even if you don't say things that distress others, you may show disapproval in your face. Some people can listen quietly to others, yet have an expression on their face that is easily interpreted as "What nonsense." That kind of nonverbal communicating hardly makes friends and influences people—in your favor, at any rate.

4. MAKE IT A GROUP ISSUE. If you hang back from defending your idea, you may be pleasantly surprised to hear someone else take up the defense instead. That person probably has more credibility and influence than you in this situation because he or she is nonpartisan. But if no one else responds immediately, just sit quietly. You don't always have to speak up just because other members want to address you on the idea, unless they ask questions that only you can answer.

If one or two people address their comments to you, and the discussion seems too narrowly focused, you can make the discussion a group issue by saying, "I've heard extensively how Jane and Howard feel about my idea, but I'd find it valuable to hear how others look at it." That's often all it takes for others to join in, and you may wind up with a lively and broad discussion. You can then relax again.

5. ANSWER. If the group discussion still leaves something to be missing or to be desired, you may want to respond to some of the disagreement. When you do, address the group, not your critic. Remember, you've made it a group issue now. Don't take it back.

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CONFLICT: A DESTRUCTIVE FORCE OR A SOURCE OF POSITIVE IMPROVEMENT

Conflict is a term that generates a good deal of ambivalence in most of us. It does so because of its great potential for personal harm and destructiveness on the one hand, and its equally great potential for creativity and growth on the other.

Our first reaction, however, is generally negative. When individuals or groups are asked to describe the image that first comes to mind when they think about conflict, they are likely to use such descriptors as:

- fighting
- tension
- anxiety
- loss of face
- fear of the other person
- yelling
- frustration
- winning and losing
- fear of the unknown
- fear of "what I might do"

The overriding connotation is one of danger. Indeed, that connotation is reinforced virtually every evening on the nightly news where conflict is routinely associated with wars, death, strikes, personal assaults, demonstrations and major confrontations between political leaders. Even in the workplace the orientation is predominantly negative:

- "Hauling someone on the carpet"
- "Bringing someone up on charges"
- "A major blow up"
- "Disciplinary action"
- "Personality clashes"
- "Boy, if I ever said what I really thought..."
- "Labor disputes"

The conflict is seen as distasteful, the emotional tone as tense and acrimonious, and the outcome as one in which persons are hurt or relationships damaged.

THE OTHER SIDE OF CONFLICT

What we often forget is that conflict has some significant benefits as well. In fact, some would contend that conflict in some form is both a pre-condition and an inevitable element in any meaningful organizational change. Perhaps we should consider conflict in the same way the Chinese define the word "crisis" -- as a "dangerous opportunity". There are risks, but often our fears about those risks are greater than the actual risks.

More importantly there are some powerful opportunities in conflicts which bring with them a sense of adventure, drama, exhilaration, challenge, and yes, even some fun. What are those opportunities? Among others they include:

1. ***A Chance to Test and Assess Oneself.*** How we hold up, how well we conduct ourselves in a conflict situation is often a measure of our self esteem and an indication of our development as a person and as a manager. It can be a source of real personal satisfaction to resolve a conflict, to come away from a conflict episode feeling good about our actions, or simply to "weather the storm" in a particularly difficult conflict.
2. ***A Source of Motivation.*** Theories of motivation have shifted over the years from the notion of tension-reduction to tension-stimulation. Sometimes the novelty of divergent opinions or the challenge of competition, not taken to excess, can have a motivating effect.
3. ***The Creative Conflict of Ideas.*** The clash of divergent views, if managed constructively, usually produces superior ideas. The mere process of thrashing out those conflicting views forces the parties to examine other considerations, other perspectives, other facts that might normally be ignored. It is generally acknowledged that groups composed of people with different interests, in which the open discussion of ideas is encouraged, arrive at better decisions. The painful lessons of groups that enforce a kind of sterile conformity, that pressure members into keeping silent about their misgivings, are well documented by Irving Janis in his analysis of such major decisions as the "Bay of Pigs" invasion.
4. ***Forcing the Search for a Resolution.*** The very fact that two parties are in conflict frequently stimulates the joint search for a new arrangement acceptable to both parties. (This is contrasted with the more insidious type of conflict in which one party, or both, is seething underneath, but carefully avoids talking about it.) What often happens is that by confronting the issues in conflict the two parties:
 - Gain new insights about each other that allow them to reconcile their differences.

- Discover new options for resolving the conflict that were not apparent before.
- Learn (or re-learn) that one party's gain is not necessarily the other's loss.

Most labor negotiators agree that it is only through the tedious hours of give-and-take at the bargaining table, and the process of getting to know their adversaries, that mutually-acceptable compromises are negotiated.

5. **Calling Attention to Systemic Problems.** Conflict often points up, in vivid fashion, problems inherent in the organizational system that require attention and possibly change.
6. **Readjusting Relationships.** Sometimes, after the dust has settled following a conflict episode, the parties have learned a great deal about their relationship and are able to readjust it to a more realistic basis.

All of this is not to suggest that conflict is intrinsically good. The harmful consequences are well known. But it does suggest that there is much to be gained by moving away from the common posture of trying to eliminate or suppress conflict toward a strategy of managing it. Managing conflict means allowing the issues (and the attendant emotions) to surface, encouraging the parties to deal directly and openly with each other, and once a decision is made or an agreement is reached, monitoring the critical period of aftermath. This is different from "resolving" the conflict. The truth is we rarely come to a complete "resolution" of conflict. There is always a residue of doubt and usually a testing of the "resolution". There is nearly always some slippage back to the original conflict position that needs to be addressed if the agreement is to work.

Managing conflict, then, is keeping it constructive -- that is, containing the destructive tendencies of the parties involved, but still allowing a degree of creative tension to exist.

A DEFINITION OF ORGANIZATIONAL CONFLICT

Before proceeding any further it is helpful to define what is meant by conflict in a typical organizational setting. It can be said that conflict:

- Always involves two or more parties (individuals or groups).

- Occurs when one party feels its concerns are frustrated or about to be frustrated.

Note that it is the perception of the party that its concerns are thwarted (or will be thwarted) whether they actually are or not. Consequently, there are times when the other party isn't even aware of the conflict.

Among the common sources of conflict are:

1. **Blocking of a Personal Goal.** Promotion is denied, a request is turned down, a favorite project is never implemented (or is "subverted" by "them").
2. **Loss of Status.** A person is demoted, loses important project responsibilities, is excluded from the "inner circle", loses the ear of the boss, is the victim of a reorganization that places him or her at a lower organizational level.
3. **Loss of Autonomy or Power.** A person who was once allowed to make operational decisions now has to pass them by the boss for approval, or a person who was used to running an independent operation now has to account more specifically for project results, funds, personnel transactions, etc.
4. **Loss of Resources.** Money, staff, equipment, office space, etc. are decreased or eliminated.
5. **Not Getting a "Fair Share" of Scarce Resources.** You do not get what you feel is due you in terms of office space, equipment (e.g., who gets the new computer), vacation preference, overtime, or you get stuck with "more than your share" of lousy work details.
6. **Threat to a Value.** Something we hold dear is jeopardized -- a principle.
7. **Threat to a Norm.** The expected pattern of behavior ("the way we do things around here") is endangered. A common version of this is the ambitious employee who consistently does more than the expected amount of work and is therefore seen as a threat to others -- a "rate buster".