



What's a Conflict?

Is This a Conflict?

Seamus is about to graduate from a prestigious university and he already has received two excellent job offers. But he's not happy. What should be a happy situation is tainted by his anxiety about which offer to accept.

The offer from a promising dotcom startup company could be a fabulous opportunity to get in on the ground floor of the next Microsoft. He fantasizes about retiring at age 35 on his own Caribbean Island. But this dotcom could fizzle, like so many other high-tech startups have fizzled, leaving him on the street in a few months looking for a new job.

His other offer is from a *Fortune* 50 smokestack company that has been in business for over a century, so he's sure it won't disappear into thin air as the dotcom might do. But career advancements would be slow. And, he fears being left behind in the technological revolution.

Seamus knows this decision will chart the course of his career for years, if not decades. "What should I do? ... What if I make the wrong decision? ... How can I resolve this conflict?" he cries in anguish.

2 Conflict Resolution

Is this a conflict?

No. Seamus is torn between two apparently incompatible options about which job to take, but this is not a conflict. His “conflict” is indecision about alternative courses of action, which can be resolved by using good decision-making tools.

Good decision-making helps to prevent conflict. If Seamus takes the wrong job and finds himself unhappy and his unhappiness spills over into his relationships at work, the seeds are sown for conflict.

Is This a Conflict?

Teammates Susan and Sean are struggling with a difficult technical problem. Susan describes to Sean an approach to solving it that she finds compelling. “Doesn’t that make sense to you?” she asks, hoping that he is persuaded by her logic.

“You make a good case,” agrees Sean, “but I think you’ve overlooked a critical piece of information. Did you see the memo from the folks over in research that warned about the dangers of doing it that way?”

“Yes, I did,” Susan replied. “But they were talking about a very different kind of situation from the one we’re dealing with.”

They argue back and forth, each teammate adding more information to support his or her position. Each one considers the other’s perspective, but they continue to see the problem differently.

Is this a conflict?

Nope. Susan and Sean disagree, but they are not in conflict. Their “conflict” is the absence of agreement about how to solve a problem that they share responsibility for solving. They are communicating well but haven’t yet arrived at a shared view of the problem. They need to use good problem-solving tools.

Good problem-solving helps to prevent conflict. If Susan and Sean continue to disagree, they may become frustrated and each may begin to view the other as stubborn, stupid, and incompetent. Once their disagreement is personalized in this way, they’ve crossed the border into the land of conflict.

Is This a Conflict?

Deana comes home from work totally drained after another hard day at the office. She is nearly in tears with fatigue and frustration. “I don’t know if I can take another day in that place,” she complains to her husband, Lowell.

“What went on at the office today, honey?” he asks attentively.

“Oh, that noisy construction is still going on across the street, and I found out today that it won’t be finished for at least another month,” Deana replies. “And the deadline is coming up soon on the big project I’ve been working on. I’m just not sure I can get it done on time. If I don’t, I’ll let the whole team down. I’m worried sick that this job just won’t work out. I can’t take much more of this conflict.”

Is this a conflict?

Nope, not this one either. Deana is experiencing a high level of job stress, but her situation is not a conflict. Her “conflict” is her emotional distress about an unpleasant and anxiety-producing situation. She needs to use good stress-management tools.

Good stress management helps to prevent conflict. If Deana’s job stress causes her to become irritable and cranky with her coworkers, they may begin to view her as a “difficult person” who is unlikable and unpleasant. Conflict is a short step beyond personal dislike.

Is This a Conflict?

Jon and Donna work closely—or at least they’re supposed to. Their desks are close. Jon often gets up from his chair to pace while he’s thinking. This drives Donna crazy. “Can’t you just sit still for five minutes?” she asks, her voice tight with tension. “Do you have a medical problem? How do you expect me to concentrate with all your commotion?”

“Look, I need to move around to think,” Jon retorts angrily. “Besides, what right do you have to complain? You wear that horrendous perfume that pollutes the air I have to breathe. Are

CAUTION!

Conflict? Or Something Else?

Don't confuse conflict with indecision, disagreement, stress, or other common experiences that may cause, or be caused by, conflict. These are not conflict and they are not best handled by conflict-resolution tools.

you trying to cover up the fact that you don't bathe?"

Jon and Donna typically talk this way to each other.

Is this a conflict?

Bingo! Indeed it is. But why? What is it about this last scenario that is different from the first three?

Jon and Donna are experiencing conflict because:

1. *They are interdependent.* That is, each needs something from the other and they are vulnerable if they don't get it. Donna needs a quiet place to work, but Jon's pacing disturbs her. Jon needs to pace in order to think, but Donna's complaints about his movement prevent him from doing so. And ...
2. *They blame each other.* That is, they find fault with each other for causing the problem. Donna criticizes Jon for being inconsiderate of her need for peace and quiet. Jon criticizes Donna for being unwilling to accept his need to move around. Here, their faultfinding has become personal, going beyond the immediate workplace issue. Donna hints that Jon may have some kind of medical or personal defect that keeps him from working quietly like a "normal" person should. Jon is not so subtle, criticizing Donna's taste in perfume and even questioning her personal hygiene. And ...
3. *They are angry.* That is, they feel emotionally upset. Donna and Jon are openly angry with each other. But in many conflicts anger is kept hidden. Sometimes we keep up the appearance of politeness and cordiality so well that our coworkers might not even be able to see that we are emotionally upset. Whether hidden or obvious, the emotion we all know as anger is always present when there's a conflict. And ...

4. *Their behavior is causing a business problem.* That is, each one's productivity and job performance is affected by their lack of cooperation. Both Donna and Jon are distracted from their own work by the other's actions. The fact that they don't like each other, by itself, is not the business problem. The problem that matters to the business is the impact on job performance caused by the behaviors that each one uses as they interact.

If we are going to learn how to resolve conflict, we first need to know what conflict is. Otherwise, we may be using an excellent tool to fix the wrong problem, like the carpenter who tries to drive a nail with a screwdriver. This book describes tools for resolving conflicts that fit this definition.

Kinds of Workplace Conflict

We see in the above scenarios that the word "conflict" is commonly used in everyday speech to label various human experiences, ranging from indecision to disagreement to stress. To be correctly understood as a "conflict," a situation must contain each of the four elements of our definition.



Workplace conflict A condition between or among workers whose jobs are interdependent, who feel angry, who perceive the other(s) as being at fault, and who act in ways that cause a business problem.

Notice that this definition includes feelings (emotions), perceptions (thoughts), and actions (behaviors). Psychologists consider these three the only dimensions of human experience. So, conflict is rooted in all parts of our human nature.



If You Don't Know What's Broke

Don't assume that as a manager you're responsible for keeping all of your employees happy. Some problems are up to the individual to resolve. Some differences are benign, even beneficial to the work environment. If you haven't thought through the situation, it's smart not to jump into the middle and try to fix it. You may only make it worse.

6 Conflict Resolution

But there are different types of conflict that fit this definition. They differ in ways that give us clues about how they can be resolved. We need to understand what kind of conflict we're dealing with before we can select the appropriate conflict-resolution tool to resolve it.


Let's use the word "structure" to refer to the ways that we can analyze conflicts. We must first understand the *structure* of a conflict to decide how to resolve it successfully. Fortunately, there are only six parts of conflict structure that we need to pay attention to:

1. **Interdependency.** How much do the parties need each other to act cooperatively, to provide resources, or to provide satisfaction of other needs? If interdependency is high, then the costs of not resolving it are also likely to be high. (See Chapter 2 for a way to measure the financial cost of unresolved conflict.) If interdependency is low, then "watchful waiting" may be an appropriate conflict-management strategy. If there were absolutely *no* interdependency, then conflict wouldn't exist at all. So, by definition, conflict occurs only between parties who need each other and who cannot simply leave the relationship with no negative consequences.
2. **Number of interested parties.** How many distinct parties—individuals or groups—have an interest in how the conflict is resolved? If there are only two parties in conflict, and those parties are individuals, resolving it can often be surprisingly easy and quick. As the number and size of parties increase, there are more people to please and the difficulty of resolving the conflict increases.
3. **Constituent representation.** Do the parties represent the interests of other people ("constituents") who are not personally and directly involved in the process of resolving the conflict? When we speak only for ourselves and do not have to please others who are not present and involved, resolution is much easier. Reaching an agreement that is acceptable to everyone who is affected by how the issue is

resolved, especially those who are not personally involved, is more difficult.

4. **Negotiator authority.** If the parties consist of more than one individual, say a department within an organization, is the person or team of people who represent the interests of that department able to make concessions or reach creative solutions without going back to their constituents for approval? If negotiator authority is high, then resolution is easier. If negotiator authority is low, then the process of resolving the conflict will take longer and will be more difficult.
5. **Critical urgency.** Is it absolutely necessary that a solution be found in the very near future, i.e., in the next few minutes or hours, to prevent a disaster? Or is there time to talk together for an extended time to find the best solution? Even better, is there no immediate crisis at all, allowing people to interact with each other in ways that *prevent* conflicts from arising in the first place? The greater the critical urgency, the less likely a consensual solution.
6. **Communication channels.** Are the parties able to talk to each other face to face in the same room? If this is not possible, can they talk voice to voice on the telephone? Or must they talk keyboard to keyboard by using real-time (synchronous) Internet technology, such as an on-line conference or chat room? Or is it necessary that they communicate back and forth using an asynchronous technology, such as e-mail? Same-time-same-place dialogue nearly always produces far better solutions than lesser communication channels.

Every manager, from time to time, has to deal



Conflict structure The dimensions or elements that allow analysis of conflict, resulting in ability to decide how best to resolve it. Conflict structure consists of:

- Interdependency
- Number of interested parties
- Constituent representation
- Negotiator authority
- Critical urgency
- Communication channels

with conflicts that are defined by a variety of structures. Let's take several kinds of workplace conflicts and examine their structure.

Interpersonal Conflict

The conflict between Donna and Jon is an “interpersonal conflict,” which is the simplest and easiest kind to resolve. And it is the most common kind of conflict in workplaces.

Two mediation tools—managerial mediation and self-mediation—are designed to resolve interpersonal conflicts and will be described in future chapters. Using these tools results in a mutually acceptable solution to the business problem about nine out of 10 times. Considering that the success rate of conflict avoidance is zero, that's pretty impressive!

Returning to our tale of woe, I'll introduce you to Edna, who is Donna and Jon's manager. Edna, whose office is just down the hall from their workstations, is very aware of the conflict between her two employees. She's overheard their arguments firsthand. Their coworkers have also come to her to complain about the tension between Donna and Jon and about how much it interferes with their own work. Edna recognizes that Donna and Jon are both good workers who try to do their best, but the tension between them is causing their job performance and productivity to suffer.

Edna can use managerial mediation to resolve their dispute so Donna and Jon can get back to working together effectively. Chapter 4 will explain exactly how Edna is going to accomplish this feat.

But first, Edna will think about the structure of conflict between Donna and Jon. She'll ask herself these six questions:

Are they interdependent? Yes, each one needs the other to avoid doing things that disturb his or her concentration. If Donna or Jon could be simply relocated so they were not near each other and their work redesigned so their job tasks were unrelated (that is, eliminate their interdependency), the conflict

would disappear. Otherwise, they remain highly interdependent.

How many interested parties? Only two—Jon and Donna. Their coworkers want their conflict to be resolved, so they won't be distracted by their public clashes, but the coworkers don't have a stake (an interest) in *how* it is resolved.

Do they represent constituencies? No. Their coworkers want the problem to be solved, but Donna and Jon don't have to get approval from coworkers for how they decide to do that.

Do they have authority to negotiate on behalf of their own interests? Absolutely. Since there are no constituencies, there's no one to please but themselves.


Is this an urgent crisis? Nope. Their behavior is affecting performance and productivity, but no disaster looms on the horizon. Although their conflict is happening in the moment, it's not a crisis—if they don't resolve it today, they'll just spat again tomorrow.

Can they communicate face to face? Certainly. They are in the same physical area, so direct (same-time-same-place) communication is possible.

No Third Party?

But what if Edna doesn't know about the conflict between Donna and Jon? Maybe her office is in another building, or another city, far away. Or maybe she just doesn't know how to deal with it, and so buries her head in the sand. Does the conflict stay unresolved?

Not necessarily. Either Donna or Jon can use a mediation tool, self-mediation, that doesn't involve a third party. If either employee knew about the tool and chose to use it, he or she could initiate a dialogue with the other.



Managerial mediation A dialogue tool for use by managers, supervisors, team leaders, and others that involves a simple form of third-party mediation to resolve conflict between two employees for whose performance the manager is responsible.



Self-mediation A dialogue tool for use by individuals who are personally involved in conflict with another person with whom they have an ongoing, interdependent relationship. The self-mediator performs the essential functions of a third-party mediator while also representing his or her own interests that are at stake in the dispute.

The initiator of self-mediation plays two roles: first, as a negotiator who is trying to get his or her own interests satisfied, and second, as a mediator who is doing some simple tasks that a third-party mediator would do, if a third party were present. But remember: Edna has

her head in the sand and no one else is there to mediate. So, Donna or Jon can mediate.

Imagine that you are either Jon or Donna and that your manager, Edna, is on the other side of the planet. It's up to you to mediate this conflict with your frustrating coworker. If you choose to use self-mediation, you would be the one who analyzes the conflict structure. Would you arrive at the same answers as Edna? Yes, you would. Structure is a property of the conflict, not of the mediator. Structure is in the nature of the conflict itself.

Team Conflict

Let's look at a conflict with a slightly different structure.

Karen leads a six-member project team that was created to develop a new insurance product and bring it to market. Each member brings a special expertise to the project, but their tasks must be carefully coordinated so that time is not wasted by any member going one direction while the rest of the team is going another. So, the team meets at least once a day for each member to give progress reports to the others.

A conflict has developed between the members of the team who are conducting market research and those who are designing the pricing structure of the new product. Over the past several days, the team's meetings have become increasingly divisive. Todd, who heads the pricing sub-team, complains that

Jeanine, who heads the market research sub-team, is not collecting market data quickly enough.


“My people have a deadline for submitting the pricing structure to top management,” Todd declares, “and we aren’t going to have time to run the necessary tests unless you get the market data to us. That’s going to make us look really bad. Hurry it up, will you!”

Jeanine retorts, “We can’t help it if the market sample we have to study are busy people with jobs to do. They aren’t just sitting by their phones waiting for us to call. We sometimes have to play telephone tag for days before we’re able to reach them. So don’t blame us for things we don’t have any control over!”

Todd and Jeanine lead the argument and the rest of the team falls in behind them. Karen realizes that a serious rift is developing on her team that endangers its success.

Let’s help Karen think about the structure of the conflict she faces. In most respects the structure is similar to the interpersonal conflict between Donna and Jon. But there is one main difference—the number of interested parties. That difference has a big impact on which mediation tool Karen should select to resolve the conflict.

Now, let’s change another part of the structure of the conflict in Karen’s team. What if team members were themselves heads of departments or work units? So, each team member is responsible and accountable to a number of other people (a constituency). Would this change how Karen approached the conflict on her team?



Team mediation A dialogue tool for use by team leaders for resolving disputes among members that involves the leader acting as a low-power, neutral third party.

Indeed it would! As representatives of constituencies, team members may have varying degrees of negotiator authority, the power that a constituency gives its representative to make compromises and engage in a give-and-take exchange to solve the



Teams and Conflicts

Research has revealed the following effects of interpersonal conflicts on teams:

- The degree of conflict that a team member is experiencing within the team does not impact positively or negatively on that person's commitment to his or her organization.
- A team member's commitment to the team and the team mission decreases if conflict goes unresolved, but can increase if conflict is well-managed and resolved.
- If unhealthy conflict goes unresolved for too long, team members are likely to quit or to search for alternatives.

Source: James Wallace Bishop and K. Dow Scott, "How Commitment Affects Team Performance," *HR Magazine*, 42 (2), February 1997, pp. 107-111.

team problem. Karen's task as mediator would be a lot more complicated and challenging if team members had little negotiator authority.

Conflict Prevention

Let's turn back the clock on Karen's team conflict several weeks or months. What might she have done to prevent the crisis that now threatens the survival of her team?

Might she have established certain skills, behavioral norms, and shared expectations that would have enabled members of her team to deal constructively with their differences?

In two words, "very likely." Karen may have been able to practice "preventive mediation" so that the destructive and costly conflict she faces today would never have happened. We'll look more closely at preventive mediation in Chapter 7.

Analyzing Conflicts

So, we now understand that the structure of conflict can vary widely. The mediation tools that are explained in this book will enable you resolve some, but not all, conflicts. Clearly, resolving an international dispute or settling a baseball players' strike is beyond our scope. Let's get a better idea of what kinds of conflicts you'll be prepared to resolve and what kinds you'd better

refer to a professional mediator.

A Conflict Analysis Worksheet

Use this worksheet to help you analyze the structure of a conflict that you are dealing with now.



Preventive mediation A dialogue tool for use by members and leaders of working groups that applies two guiding principles drawn from the practice of mediation and enables non-adversarial management of differences in all important relationships.

Circle the number that most accurately reflects the conflict situation. Scoring instructions are below.

Interdependency

- 1 = low (the parties need to interact occasionally to get their jobs done)
- 2 = medium (the parties interact frequently to exchange information or resources)
- 3 = high (the parties interact daily and have a high need for voluntary cooperation to do their jobs satisfactorily)

Number of interested parties

- 1 = two parties
- 3 = three or four parties
- 5 = five or more parties

Constituent representation

- 1 = none (each party is an individual who is not negotiating on behalf of others)
- 2 = one or two other people are being represented by the individuals who are involved in resolving the conflict
- 3 = several other people constitute an identifiable team or group that is being represented by individuals who are directly involved in negotiations
- 7 = a large disorganized group is being represented

Negotiator authority

- 1 = absolute (parties are individuals without constituents or they do not need to get prior approval from constituents to make compromises with other parties)
- 3 = high (parties may make compromises with confidence that constituents will agree)

5 = low (parties may offer compromises but need to check with constituents for approval)

7 = none (parties can only deliver messages from constituents)

Critical urgency

1 = none (the current situation, although not desirable, can continue indefinitely without causing great harm)

2 = urgent (a solution must be reached in the next few days)

6 = crisis (a solution must be reached immediately, in the next few minutes or hours)

Communication channels

1 = parties can meet face to face (same time, same place)

3 = parties can meet only by telephone or videoconference (same time, different place)

5 = parties can only write asynchronous messages (different time, different place)

Scoring

Add the numbers that you have circled while having in mind a particular conflict that you want to resolve. The possible range is from 6 to 33. The lower the number, the more likely it is that you can resolve the conflict yourself by using the mediation tools provided in this book. The higher the number, the more likely it is that you may need a professional mediator to resolve it satisfactorily.

What Is Mediation?

Readers who are already knowledgeable about mediation may be puzzled—even shocked—that I’m using the term to refer to ways of resolving conflicts without the involvement of a third party. Mediation is usually defined as a process that necessarily involves the participation of a neutral third party (a “mediator”) who helps disputing parties find solutions to contested issues.

Let me explain your puzzlement and ease your shock.


Mediation is an emerging field of professional practice. Most mediators come from other professional fields—such as psychology, social work, counseling, employee relations, and law—that license their members. That is, individuals must demonstrate a defined level of competency to be permitted to offer

paid professional services to consumers. Mediation is on its way to becoming such a field.

But most professions that license their practitioners recognize that there exists a core body of knowledge and skill that the general public may learn and use for their own benefit, without paying for the services of a professional. For example, self-health care is widely accepted. All of us “practice medicine” by getting rest and drinking lots of fluids when we feel a cold coming on. We also “practice psychology” when we listen compassionately to a friend who is feeling sad, lonely, or anxious due to a difficult life situation. Unless a medical or psychological problem reaches a certain level of severity, we don’t need to pay a physician or psychotherapist for these services. We can do it ourselves, once we know the basics—and the limits—of that field of professional service.

The same is true of mediation. Daily newspaper headlines report conflicts in business, in society, and around the world that challenge the abilities of the most expert mediators. But in our daily work lives, we can “practice mediation” once we know the basics—and the limits—of the field.

This book gives you, the manager, a basic knowledge of mediation that enables you to use some of the tools of the professional practitioner to manage conflicts in your area of responsibility. It also alerts you to the limits of “self-help mediation” so you can call a professional when you recognize that the mediation tools in this book are likely not to be effective.



Self-help mediation The use, by a third party or a stakeholder, of simple dialogue tools to resolve conflicts that have not become serious enough to require the services of a professional mediator.

**Smart
Managing**

So, managerial mediation, self-mediation, team mediation, and preventive mediation are the names given to self-help mediation tools that managers can use in their jobs. Reading this book and using these dialogue tools does not make you a professional mediator, any more than reading a medical self-

help book makes you a physician. It's been estimated that 90% of health problems can be prevented or managed by wise choices that we can make about our own health—eating a balanced diet, exercising regularly, maintaining positive social and family relationships, avoiding tobacco, drugs, and excessive alcohol, etc. By making wise choices about how we handle conflicts, especially before they escalate and become crises, we can also prevent or manage an equal percentage of conflicts. In this book I intend to give you the information you need to make wise choices.

Manager's Checklist for Chapter 1

- ❑ The word “conflict” is commonly used in everyday speech to label situations that are not really conflicts. We need to know what conflict is before we can successfully resolve it. It must involve a condition between or among workers whose jobs are interdependent, who feel angry, who perceive the other(s) as being at fault, and who act in ways that cause a business problem.
- ❑ Different kinds of conflicts have different structural properties, depending on six dimensions or elements: interdependency, number of interested parties, constituent representation, negotiator authority, critical urgency, and communication channels. The mediation tools explained in this book are designed to help you resolve conflicts with some kinds of structure, but not others.
- ❑ Mediation can be done by people who are not mediators. Indeed, every manager can use the self-help mediation tools described in this book to resolve conflicts for which they are designed without additional training.