Managing Conflict: A Practical Approach

Claire Tehan, MA
Tehan & Associates
Clairetehan@verizon.net

Objectives

1. Identify specific constructive and destructive behavioral responses to conflict.
2. Understand the difference between active and passive responses to conflict.
3. Gain insight about one’s own response to conflict and apply new strategies for resolving conflict.

Managing Conflict

Conflict

Any situation in which people have incompatible goals, interests, principles or feelings
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Conflict management is the #1 developmental need of managers in the Center for Creative Leadership's Foundation of Leadership Program.

Unmanaged employee conflict is responsible for 65% of workplace performance problems.

30-42% of a manager’s time is spent dealing with conflict and its consequences.

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Basic Assumptions

Conflict is inevitable: it cannot, nor should it be completely avoided.

People can change the way they respond to conflict.

The more people know, the better equipped they will be to change.

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Goal of Successful conflict management is not its elimination, but to reduce its harmful effects and maximize its useful ones.
Types of Conflict

Cognitive Conflict

- Focuses on ideas, not personalities
- Affect is neutral, or positive
- Unrelated, or positively related, to group functioning

Emotional Conflict

- Focuses on people, not ideas
- Can occur at any time
- Affect is negative
- Can escalate rapidly
- Negatively related to group functioning
Path of Conflict

Precipitating Event and/or Hot Buttons

Hot Buttons: people or situations that may irritate you enough to provoke conflict by producing destructive responses

Hot Buttons

The “hotter the hot button, the more likely it is to produce:

- Strong expressions of negative emotions
- Feelings of personal provocation
- Automatic and impulsive responding
- Increased tension

Path of Conflict

Constructive Responses
- Behaviors that keep conflict to a minimum

Destructive Responses
- Behaviors that escalate or prolong conflict
Constructive Responses
Behaviors that are highly effective in keeping the harmful effects of conflict to a minimum.

Constructive responses emphasize:
- Task completion & problem solving
- Focus on exchange of ideas
- Expression of positive emotions
- Not provoking the other person

Outcomes of Constructive Responses
- Win-win solutions
- Open and honest communication of feelings
- Non-judgmental actions
- Thoughtful responses (not impulsive)
- Not sticking adamantly to one position
- Both parties’ needs met

Destructive Responses
Behaviors that escalate or prolong conflict.

Destructive responses emphasize:
- Negative expression of emotions
- Trying to win...no matter what
- Lack of respect for the other person
- Avoiding conflict rather than facing it
Outcomes of Destructive Responses
- Feelings of anger and frustration
- Judgmental actions
- Getting even and keeping score
- Other party does not have needs met
- Closed channels of communication
- Refusing to deal with issues
- Tasks not completed

Active and Passive Responses to Conflict
Two additional categories:
- **Active**
  - involve overt responses, taking action, or making an effort. Outcome can be either constructive or destructive
- **Passive**
  - involve withholding a response, not taking action, or not making an effort. Outcome: constructive or destructive

Conflict Response Categories
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**Perspective Taking**
- Imagines what the other person is thinking and feeling
- Tries to understand how things look from that person’s perspective

**Creating Solutions**
- Attempts to generate creative solutions
- Brainstorms with the other person to create new ideas

**Expressing Emotions**
- Talks honestly and directly to the other person
- Directly communicates their feelings at the time
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**Reaching Out**
- Tries to repair the emotional damage caused by the conflict
- Makes the first move to get the communication started again

**Reflective Thinking**
- Analyzes the situation to determine the best course of action
- Reflects on the best way to proceed

**Delay Responding**
- Delays responding until the situation has settled down
- Lets things calm down before proceeding
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Adapting
- Tries to stay flexible and optimistic
- Tries to make the best of the situation

Winning
- Argues vigorously for their own position
- Tries to win at all costs

Displaying Anger
- Raises their own voice
- Uses harsh, angry words
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Demeaning Others
- Rolls their eyes when the other person speaks
- Is sarcastic towards that person

Retaliating
- Tries to get even
- Passively obstructs the other person

Avoiding
- Acts distant and aloof toward that person
- Keeps as much distance as possible from that person
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Yielding
- Lets the other person have their way in order to avoid further conflict
- Gives in to the other person just to make life easier all the way around

Hiding Emotions
- Hides their true feelings
- Feels upset but doesn’t show it

Self-Criticizing
- Is critical of self for not handling the conflict better
- Replays the incident over and over in their mind
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**Hot Buttons**

Situation and individuals most likely to provoke conflict for you

- Abrasive
- Aloof
- Hostile

**Hot Buttons**

- Micro-managing
- Overly analytical
- Self-centered
- Unappreciative
- Unreliable
- Untrustworthy

**Hot Buttons**

- To cool your Hot Buttons, you must cool yourself
- Cooling yourself involves gaining insight into your Hot Buttons
- Goal: respond to provocative events/people in more constructive ways
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Hot Buttons

- Why is this Button Hot for me rather than Cool?
- When my HB is pushed, how do I usually feel? How do I usually respond?
- The next time my HB is pushed, how do I want to feel? How do I want to respond?
- What have been the personal and professional consequences of responding as I do to by HB?

Analyze a specific instance

- When, where, and how did the situation arise? What happened?
- How did I feel? Were my feelings justified by the situation?
- How did I react? Were my actions justified by the situation?
- Did my actions serve to escalate my emotions or the conflict?

Analyze cont’d

- In what alternative ways could I have reacted to the provocation?
- Could this situation have been perceived in a different way?
- Would my HB have been pushed if I’d taken a different view of the situation?
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Perspective Taking on situation

- Does the button pusher behave this way only towards me? If so, why?
- Is this a new, temporary way of behaving or a long-standing characteristic?
- Why might the BP be acting this way?
- Does the BP have the skills, abilities, or resources to act in a different manner or reach my expectations?

Reflect

- How do others deal with BP?
- What methods are successful?
- What methods are unsuccessful?
- How do they cope with the emotional strain that results from interacting with button pushers?

Words to Live By

- “When anger rises, think of the consequences.” Confucius
- “Hear the other side.” St. Augustine
- “We boil at different degrees.” Ben Franklin