

# Less Time, More Impact

## Suggestions for Surviving in Organizations

### Oh No! . . .Conflict (Part 1 of 2)

Many of us grew up avoiding conflict wherever possible. If conflict arises while visiting friends or at a group gathering or meeting, we may feel uncomfortable.

One of the reasons we may feel that conflict is bad is because we believe that harmony is normal and conflict is to be avoided. We fear the confrontation associated with conflict; because we associate conflict with anger, we consider it destructive. Conflict is a normal part of life and change. It happens continually and can have positive outcomes.

A conflict issue can be large or small, interpersonal or between community groups. It can be a situation as simple as a parent wanting a preschooler to eat a food the child doesn't want, or as complex as two countries claiming the same territory.

Whether conflict is large or small, it has certain characteristics.

- There have to be at least two parties—two or more people, two groups, two countries, person and a group, etc.
- There has to be some kind of struggle, or threat, either real or suspected over competing interests.
- There must be some interaction between parties.
- The interaction may be emotional.

Each of us has ways of resolving conflict. Many of these reactions are patterns we learned as children.

We also developed a sense of our position in a conflict. Whether we tend to stand firm, avoid conflict, or get in the middle of trying to settle a conflict between two parties, shows habits learned early in life.

Here are some things to consider:

- We have ideal images of ourselves and people in our lives.
- The way we deal with conflict reflects the values we hold.
- Stress and conflict interact. Stress can cause conflict and increase it. Our reaction is tied to our personal pattern for handling conflict.



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Let's take a look at how a conflict cycle often develops. Conflict, according to a model by Robinson, tends to follow a cycle.

Role Dilemma-People or groups who are involved raise questions about what is happening, who is right, what should be done. They try to decide if they should take sides, if so, which one. (Tension Development and Role Dilemma often happen at the same time.)

Injustice Collecting-Each party begins to gather support. Each lists the problems, justifies their position, and thinks of revenge or ways to win.

Confrontation-The parties meet head on and clash. If both parties hold fast to their side, the showdown may cause permanent barriers. Confrontation may be lessened or avoided by one or both parties making adjustments.

Adjustments-if one party is weak and the other is strong; the strong party can win by "domination," but the conflict may reappear. If parties have equal power, and neither party decides to change they can wage a "cold war," each party trying to weaken the other. One party may choose to "avoid" the other or the two parties may choose "compromise," each gaining a little and losing a little. Finally, the two parties can "collaborate" in an active process that looks for a solution that takes care of both parties' needs.

In fact, in our society only compromise/collaboration resolves the conflict over time. Other adjustments are, at best, short term solutions. If domination, cold war, or avoidance is chosen, the conflict cycle can be ongoing.

Life is too complex and fast changing to expect people to always agree. When people disagree everyone has an opportunity to see other sides of the issue. This can open the door to new solutions that are better accepted and more effective than previous ones.

Most of us use a variety of methods for handling conflict. We may feel more at ease with some methods than others. With practice we can become more effective in achieving positive outcomes.

### RESOURCES:

Anderson, Carol, Hamann, Majorie (1985). Tact in Action. Unpublished teaching guide. University of Wisconsin Extension, Family Living Education, Madison.

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