

Management Of Conflict In Organizations

Posted on September 19, 2019

Introduction

Conflict is unavoidable in organizations because people depend on one another while bringing different goals, expertise, values, identities, and access to resources. A project manager may prioritize deadlines, a quality team may insist on more testing, employees may seek manageable workloads, and senior leaders may demand rapid growth. These differences do not automatically indicate failure. Conflict becomes harmful when it turns personal, remains hidden, is managed through intimidation, or prevents people from doing their work. It can become useful when disagreements expose weak assumptions, improve decisions, and allow concerns to be addressed before they become crises. (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003)

Effective conflict management therefore does not aim to eliminate disagreement. An organization with no visible conflict may be peaceful, but it may also be dominated by fear, conformity, or silence. The managerial task is to distinguish constructive task conflict from destructive relationship conflict, design fair processes, and select an approach suited to the issue. This requires attention to power. Advice that simply tells employees to communicate openly is inadequate when one party controls pay, promotion, scheduling, or job security. (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003)

Sources and Forms of Organizational Conflict

Task conflict concerns what should be done: the interpretation of evidence, the design of a product, or the priority of objectives. Process conflict concerns how work should be divided, sequenced, and monitored. Relationship conflict involves hostility, disrespect, mistrust, or identity-based tension. The categories overlap. A disagreement about a deadline may begin as task conflict and become personal when one colleague describes another as lazy or incompetent. Once people feel attacked, they interpret new information defensively, and the original problem becomes harder to solve. (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003)

Structural conditions often generate recurring conflict. Ambiguous roles lead two teams to claim the same authority or assume the other will complete a task. Scarce budgets create competition. Interdependent workflows mean that one unit's delay becomes another unit's emergency. Performance measures can reward departments for behavior that harms the organization as a whole—for example, purchasing the cheapest materials while manufacturing absorbs quality failures. Organizational change creates uncertainty about status, competence, and future employment. Cultural and professional differences can also shape communication: direct disagreement may be treated as honesty in one group and disrespect in another.

Conflict can also reveal discrimination, harassment, unsafe conditions, or unethical behavior. These matters should not be reframed as ordinary interpersonal misunderstandings. An employee reporting harassment does not merely have a “different communication style” from the alleged harasser. Organizations need formal procedures, trained investigators, protection against retaliation, and appropriate corrective action. Mediation may be useful in some disputes, but it is not suitable when participation is coerced, evidence must be established, or severe power imbalance makes bargaining unsafe.

Approaches to Managing Conflict

The Thomas-Kilmann framework describes five common approaches: competing, avoiding, accommodating, compromising, and collaborating. Competing emphasizes one’s own concerns and can be necessary during emergencies, safety violations, or decisions for which a leader has clear accountability. Overuse creates resentment and suppresses information. Avoiding can provide time to gather facts or let emotions settle, but chronic avoidance allows confusion and hostility to grow. Accommodation preserves relationships when the issue is minor or the other party has stronger knowledge, yet repeated accommodation by the same person may create inequity. (Thomas & Kilmann, n.d.)

Compromise seeks a workable middle ground and is valuable when time is limited and both sides can give something without violating important principles. Its weakness is that splitting the difference may produce a poor solution or treat unequal claims as equivalent. Collaboration aims to understand underlying interests and create an option that addresses them more fully. It works well for complex, recurring, and interdependent issues, but it requires time, information, psychological safety, and authority to implement the result. Collaboration is not a moral command for every conflict; sometimes a clear decision, boundary, or investigation is more appropriate. (Thomas & Kilmann, n.d.)

Interest-based negotiation improves resolution by separating positions from underlying needs. Two departments may argue over ownership of a staff member when the real interests are access to specialized expertise and predictable scheduling. Once those interests are clear, shared service arrangements or rotation may become possible. Parties should define the issue in neutral language, identify facts that are agreed and disputed, listen for interests, generate alternatives before evaluating them, and document commitments. Specific follow-up dates prevent agreements from disappearing after a difficult meeting. (Fisher et al., n.d.)

Leadership, Communication, and Systems

Managers influence whether conflict becomes learning or damage. They should intervene early without rushing to judgment, speak separately with parties when needed, and establish norms for evidence-based disagreement. Meetings improve when participants know the decision to be made,

receive information in advance, and can challenge ideas without attacking people. Leaders can invite dissent by asking what could make a proposal fail, assigning someone to test assumptions, and acknowledging when criticism changes a decision. These practices reduce the risk that status determines which information is heard.

Emotional intelligence helps managers notice escalation and regulate their own reactions. However, conflict should not be psychologized so heavily that structural causes disappear. A team may not need another workshop on empathy if members face impossible workloads, contradictory instructions, and an incentive system that rewards internal competition. Managers should review roles, resources, workflows, policies, and measures. Many disputes can be reduced by clarifying decision rights, creating shared goals, and ensuring that employees have channels to raise concerns outside their immediate supervisors.

Remote and hybrid work introduce additional challenges. Written messages lack tone, delays can be interpreted as disrespect, and unequal access to informal conversations can produce suspicion. Teams should choose communication channels intentionally: sensitive disagreement is usually better addressed through a conversation than a long email thread. Documentation remains important, but it should summarize decisions rather than substitute for dialogue. Time-zone fairness, meeting access, and clear response expectations also prevent routine coordination problems from becoming personal conflict.

Creating a Constructive Conflict Culture

A constructive culture combines candor with respect and accountability. Employees need confidence that raising a risk will not damage their careers. Leaders must respond consistently, especially when a high performer violates behavioral standards. Training should use realistic scenarios and teach questioning, listening, negotiation, and bystander intervention. Formal systems should track patterns across complaints, turnover, absenteeism, and team performance. Repeated “personality clashes” in one unit may indicate a managerial or structural problem.

Resolution should be evaluated by more than whether the parties stop arguing. A durable outcome clarifies responsibilities, restores workable relationships where possible, addresses harm, and reduces the chance of recurrence. Some relationships cannot or should not be restored; separation or discipline may be necessary. The goal is a fair process and safe, effective work, not superficial harmony.

Conflict management also requires procedural justice. People are more likely to accept an unfavorable decision when they believe the process was neutral, they had a genuine opportunity to be heard, reasons were explained, and standards were applied consistently. Managers should avoid promising outcomes before investigating and should distinguish confidentiality from secrecy: information may need to be limited, but participants should still understand the process and expected

timeline. Documentation should record behavior and impact rather than labels such as “difficult” or “not a team player,” which often conceal bias.

Cross-cultural conflict deserves particular care. Communication norms differ in directness, eye contact, interruption, emotional expression, and attitudes toward hierarchy. Managers should not assume that one style is professional and another deficient. At the same time, cultural explanation cannot excuse harassment, exclusion, or unsafe conduct. The goal is to establish shared behavioral expectations while allowing different ways of contributing. Structured turn-taking, written input, and multiple channels for feedback can help employees who are disadvantaged by fast, status-driven meetings.

Conflict can also be productive at the strategic level. Organizations operating in uncertain environments need people who challenge optimistic forecasts, identify ethical risks, and question whether a familiar practice still works. Without dissent, teams can drift into groupthink, especially when leaders are charismatic or deadlines are severe. Formal red-team reviews, pre-mortems, and independent quality functions create legitimate spaces for disagreement. These practices are valuable only if critics are protected from retaliation and decision-makers explain how concerns were considered. (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003)

Labor relations demonstrate that some conflicts concern interests rather than misunderstandings. Employees and management may genuinely disagree about wages, staffing, scheduling, or control. Collective bargaining, grievance procedures, and representation give those disputes structure. Attempting to solve an interest conflict through motivational language can obscure the real distribution of resources and authority. Constructive management recognizes that a fair agreement may emerge through organized negotiation rather than interpersonal harmony. (Fisher et al., n.d.)

Conclusion

Organizational conflict is neither inherently good nor inherently bad. Its effects depend on the issue, the power relationship, the behavior of participants, and the systems surrounding them. Task disagreement can improve reasoning, while personal hostility, silence, and unmanaged structural tension reduce performance and well-being. Managers need a range of approaches rather than one preferred style. By clarifying interests, selecting suitable processes, protecting employees, redesigning conflicting incentives, and treating respectful dissent as valuable information, organizations can turn many disagreements into better decisions while responding firmly to misconduct and harm. (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Fisher et al., n.d.; Thomas & Kilmann, n.d.)

References

De Dreu, C. K. W., and L. R. Weingart. “Task Versus Relationship Conflict, Team Performance, and Team Member Satisfaction.” *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 2003.

Fisher, R., W. Ury, and B. Patton. *Getting to Yes*.

Thomas, K. W., and R. H. Kilmann. *Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument*.