

LEADERSHIP BRIEFING

Conflict Management in Interdisciplinary & Cross-Cultural Organizations

by Valerie Barker

What is conflict?

The three general characteristics of conflict are : "interaction, interdependence, and incompatible goals" (Putnam & Poole, 1987, p.552)

Conflict: Constructive or Destructive?

Contemporary organizations tend to be dominated by task forces, project teams, or work groups. These groups often comprise experts from varying disciplines and national cultures. As individuals, group members interact, they are interdependent, and, occasionally, their goals appear incompatible. In these circumstances, conflict is inevitable (Kolb & Putnam, 1992).

But is conflict necessarily a bad thing? There are both constructive (Baron, 1991) and destructive (Schwenk & Cosier, 1993) elements to conflict in an organizational setting. For example, conflict may stimulate innovation, new ideas, and information gathering. Conversely, conflict can turn task issues into emotional ones leading to turf protection and a lack of integration (Xie, Song, & Stringfellow, 1998). It is the way that conflict is managed that makes for a favorable outcome.

Strategies for Conflict Management

Research in the area of interpersonal communication (e.g., Newton & Burgoon, 1990) identifies two broad approaches to conflict management (also known as influence strategies). The first is **integrative** or collaborative in nature. This includes cooperative behaviors or statements that pursue mutually favorable resolutions of conflicts. The second approach

to conflict incorporates two strategies -- **avoidance** and **distribution**. Avoidance tactics minimize discussion of conflicts by denying its presence, communicating ambiguously about it, or shifting the conversation. An overwhelming body of evidence shows that the integrative approach to conflict management is the most productive with regard to both interpersonal satisfaction and organizational outcome (e.g., Infante & Gorden, 1991; Infante & Rancer, 1996; Newton & Burgoon, 1990; Xie et al., 1998).

The integrative approach to conflict management does not entail "giving in." It means taking a problem-solving rather than an aggressive stance.

Argumentation vs. Verbal Aggression

Infante and Rancer (1996) identify argumentation as a form of integrative conflict management. Intuitively, this appears at odds with the idea of a collaborative perspective. But Infante believes that "argumentativeness involves attacking the *positions* others take on *issues*" while "verbal aggressiveness involves attacking the *self-concepts of others* rather than their positions" (p. 320).

"Organized endeavor is most committed and satisfying for subordinates when verbal abrasiveness is filtered out and congeniality lubricates communication with superiors" (Infante & Gorden, 1991, p.302).

While argumentation is a form of problem-solving communication behavior, verbal aggression is a method of inflicting psychological pain such as humiliation or embarrassment. Aggressive attacks of this kind fall into three basic areas -- *group membership, personal failings, and relational failings*.

Both types of communication -- argumentation and verbal aggression -- tend to be reciprocal in nature. That is, reasoned arguments beget other reasoned arguments; by contrast, verbal aggression meets with an

equal or more aggressive response (Newton & Burgoon, 1990).

Research also shows that conflict management strategy affects organizational outcomes (Xie, Song, & Stringfellow, 1998). A study pertaining to organizational disagreements (Infante, Myers, & Burkel, 1994) found that disagreements with *constructive* outcomes were argumentative in nature whereas *destructive* disagreements were characterized by verbal aggressiveness.

And a study of employees from a variety of organizations (Infante and Gorden, 1991), found that subordinates were most satisfied with their job and their superior when the superior was high in argumentativeness, but low in verbal aggression. The researchers also assessed the effects on subordinates' feelings about their superiors' use of an affirming communication style -- a friendly, attentive approach. Affirmation along with low verbal aggressiveness was found to improve the relationship between superior and subordinate, and subordinates' *commitment* to their organization.

Much of the inquiry relating to the management of interpersonal conflict has taken an American, white, middle class perspective. It is important to guard against a "one-size-fits all" approach to every interpersonal situation where conflict management is concerned. Individuals cannot be understood from a single cultural perspective. Communication rules vary from one culture to another (Collier, Ribeau, & Hecht, 1986). For example, Hecht and Ribeau (1984) found that Hispanics emphasize relational reinforcement and bonding while whites emphasize individualism and rewards. How *do* such rules affect conflict management in cross-cultural organizational settings?

Conflict Management in Intercultural Settings

Hofstede (1980) highlighted the ways in which cultural values affect the manner in which people interact within organizations. Collectivistic cultures (e.g., Pacific Rim, South America, Africa) emphasize group ideologies seeking collective interests, and group harmony. Individualistic societies (e.g., America, Great Britain, Germany) emphasize individual goals and value group harmony less.

Persons from collectivistic societies show commitment to organizations as collective cultures as in West African nations. This results in a need for a harmonious working relationships within the work group. Collaboration and compromise are more likely to feature as conflict management strategies in such societies. By contrast, choice and competition dominate as ideologies often espoused by persons of an individualistic orientation (Xie, Song, & Stringfellow, 1994) -- as in the United States.

For example, Kozan's research (Kozan, 1989; Kozan & Ergin, 1998; Kozan & Ilter, 1994) documents the preference for third party mediation of conflict among managers and subordinates from collectivistic societies compared to the preference for face-to-face conflict management among individualistic organizational members.

Conflict Management -- Some Tactics	
Do	Don't
Emphasize commonalities	Criticize personal attributes
Accept responsibilities	Attribute blame
Offer some concessions	Make demands
Take a win/win approach	Use threats

And so, when seeking favorable outcomes, it is important to be mindful of the ways in which individuals from diverse national settings prefer to deal with conflict. Questions of face, forms of expression, and consensus come into play (Sillars & Weisberg, 1987). However, whatever the setting it seems that the most constructive approach to conflict resolution combines assertiveness with concern for others. It requires that individuals work cooperatively, bringing relevant issues into the open, sharing information, and showing disagreement with stated positions rather than attacking interpersonal attributes of others.

References

Baron, R. A. (1991). Positive effects of conflict. Employee Responsibilities and Rights Journal, 4, 25-36.

Collier, M. J., Ribeau, S. A., & Hecht, M. L. (1986). Intracultural communication rules and outcomes within three domestic cultures. International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 10, 439-457.

Hecht, M. L., & Ribeau, S. A. (1984). Ethnic communication: A comparative analysis of satisfying communication. Paper presented at Speech communication Association Convention, New York.

Hofstede, G. H. (1980). Culture's consequences: International differences in work-related values. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Infante, D. A., & Gorden, W. I. (1991). How employees see the boss: Test of an argumentative and affirming model of supervisors' communicative behavior. Western Journal of Speech Communication, 55, 294-304.

Infante, D. A., Myers, S. A., & Burkel, R. A. (1994). Argument and verbal aggression in constructive and destructive family and organizational agreements. Western Journal of Communication, 58, 73-84.

Infante, D. A., & Rancer, A. S. (1996). Argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness: A review of recent theory and research. In B. R. Burlinson & A. W. Kunkel (Eds.), Communication Yearbook 19 (pp.319-352). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Kolb, D. M., & Putnam, L. L. (1992). The multiple faces of conflict in organizations. Journal of Organizational Behavior, 13, 311-324.

Kozan, M. K. (1989). Cultural influences on styles of handling interpersonal conflicts: Comparisons among Jordanian, Turkish, and U.S. managers. Human Relations, 42, 787-799.

Kozan, M. K., & Ergin, C. (1998). Preference for third party help in conflict management in the United States and Turkey: An experimental study. Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, 29, 525-539.

Kozan, M. K., & Ilter, S. S. (1994). Third party roles played by Turkish managers in subordinates' conflicts. Journal of organizational behavior, 15, 453-466.

Newton, D. A., & Burgoon, J. K. (1990). The use and consequences of verbal influence strategies during interpersonal disagreements. Human Communication Research, 16, 477-518.

Putnam, L. L., & Poole, M. S. (1987). Conflict and negotiation. In F. M. Jablin (Ed.), Handbook of organizational communication (pp. 549-599). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Schwenk, C., & Cosier, R. A. (1993). Effects of consensus and devil's advocacy on strategic decision making. Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 23, 126-139.

Sillars, A. L., Coletti, S., Parry, D., & Rogers, M. (1982). Coding verbal conflict tactics: Nonverbal and perceptual correlates of the avoidance-distributive-integrative distinction. Human Communication Research, 9, 83-95.

Sillars, A. L., & Weisberg, J. (1987). Conflict as a social skill. In M. E. Roloff & G. R. Miller (Eds.), Interpersonal processes: New directions in communication research (pp. 140-171). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Xie, J., Song, M., & Stringfellow, A. (1998). Interfunctional conflict, conflict resolution styles, and new product success: A four-culture comparison. Management Science, 44, S192-S206.