
THE FIVE-STEP APPROACH TO PROBLEM SOLVING

By Michael A. Taylor

Scenario: Two four-year old children run to get a yellow hula-hoop. They reach it simultaneously and start pulling on it, yelling “MINE!” One child starts stepping in front of the other child to block them from the hoop. OK teacher, how do you handle this?

If there is a safety concern (i.e. the children begin to push or shove) it may be necessary to physically intervene immediately. However, you have just been presented with a very important “teachable moment” that could benefit everyone involved – you, the two children involved as well as the children and parents observing the situation. Resist the impulse to get involved and resolve the situation for the children. Provide them with guidance only when necessary. Remember that our ultimate goal is to help the children learn how to take care of themselves – give them the opportunity to figure things out for themselves! Follow these 5 steps to resolve conflict:

1. Approach:

- Close enough to intervene if necessary
(You’ve signaled your awareness and availability)

At this point we hope the children will be able to resolve the situation to their mutual satisfaction. If there is no further conflict, if the children are able to resolve the issue themselves, no further action is necessary. If the children are not able to reach a mutually acceptable solution, it may be necessary to help them understand their feelings. Give them the tools to articulate what they are going through...

2. Define the Problem:

- Describe the scene
- Reflect what the children have said (active listening)
- NO JUDGMENTS, NO VALUES, NO SOLUTIONS
“It looks like you both want the yellow hoop.”
“I see you are yelling at each other and are angry.”

If the children are still not able to reach a mutually acceptable solution, it may be necessary to ask more questions in order to help them get to the root of the problem and to understand their emotions...

3. Gather Data:

- Not directed toward pinpointing blame or fault.
- Drawing out details, defining problems.
- Help children communicate vs. slugging it out:
“How did this happen?”

“What do you want to tell her?”
 “How could you solve this problem?”
 “How could you use it without fighting?”

If the children are still involved in conflict, it may be necessary to provide a little direction without solving the problem for them...

4. Generate Alternatives:

- Give children the job of thinking and figuring out what *they* are going to do to solve *their* problem.
- Be there to facilitate:
 - “How are we going to solve this problem?”
- Agree on a solution;
- For example, they might say:
 - “We could take turns.”
 - “That’s OK, she was there first, – I will use a red hoop.”
 - “We could both use it together.”
 - “We could both do something else.”
 - “No one could use it.”
- Some of the things that the children come up with would never occur to us but will work well for them.
- For example, they might say:
 - “We could count to three and then switch using it.”

If there is still no resolution, if the children have not been able to solve their own problem, it may require that the teacher become more actively involved...

5. Follow Through Physically:

- Model appropriate behavior.
- Narrate the model behavior.
- BOTTOM LINE GOAL is to resolve the social conflict.
- Last resort is to solve the problem if they can't:
 - “It looks like this is too hard for you two to figure out. This is what we’ll do...”

Remember to always start with as little intervention as the children need. The goal is to maximize the SELF-resolution. Don't “give a 5” (Follow Through Physically) when a 1 (Approach) or a 2 (Define Problem) will do. So what do we accomplish when we learn good conflict resolutions skills? Some of the assets that have been identified are: creativity, empathy, appropriate assertiveness, cooperation, emotion management, negotiation skills, and appreciation of diversity.

Gym owners/directors can (and SHOULD) use these conflict resolution skills just as effectively with problems that occur between staff members or with customers. Empower your employees to solve their own problems.

Understanding Conflict

Objective - conflict is rooted in real differences of interest according to the position which individuals occupy in a social system. Conflict is structural, meaning that it is an outcome of incompatible interests based on competition for scarce resources. Real differences in interests (i.e.: the competition for power, resources, and territory) present automatic conflict which can be identified with an objective approach.

Subjective – conflict is psychological, cultural, and relational. This focuses on the perceptions, beliefs, and behavioral interactions of the parties involved. Subjective approaches stress that altering perceptions and evaluations make an engagement with how as goal incompatibilities emerge (people wanting different things).

Decision Styles List—Continuum of Involvement

We should be mindful that every time we are asked for input does not indicate a “Co-Creating” mindset. Both parties need to clarify where the particular issue is on the Continuum.

- **Telling:** “Okay team, here’s the problem. Here’s the solution. Here’s what I want you to do. Do it.” The boss or team leader has all the clout, and makes the full decision.
- **Selling:** “Here’s the problem. Here’s the solution. Here’s why I came to it. Now do it.” The boss still has all the clout, but needs to explain why the decision has been made without inviting buy-in.
- **Testing:** “Here’s the problem. Here’s my solution. What do you think?” if subordinates offer some compelling arguments to the contrary, the boss will scrub the decision and come back with another.
- **Consulting:** “Here’s the problem. I have no solution. I have some ideas, but I’d like to hear from you.” As people talk, the boss listens until he or she has heard enough and says, “Hold it. I like what Joe said. We’re going to do that.”
- **Co-Creating:** “Here’s the problem. Let’s make the decision together.” The consensus process requires more time, more interpersonal skill, and more maturity on the part of the group. It’s useful to give people a time window. “I’ve only got three weeks. If by then, we haven’t got a true consensus, I’ll have to make the call.” At the end, everyone, including the leader, can say, “I’ve been heard, I’ve been understood, and I’m willing to back the decision, outside the room, with a smile.”

Conflict Resolution

Experienced practitioners of military peacekeeping combine their analysis with insights from academic conflict resolution.

Consent-promoting techniques, (based on principles of impartiality, legitimacy, mutual respect, minimum force, credibility, and transparency) constitute the ultimate skills and processes of peacekeeping, designed to win hearts and minds.

When a conflict rears its ugly head, there's usually a reason for it. Use the opportunity to create something positive. Here are some tips for how to go about it:

- **Don't try to determine who "started it."** This is a thankless, unproductive task. Instead, work on finding a solution.
- **Don't attack people.** Always focus on the problem that needs to be changed, not on personalities. How Do You Deliver Criticism?
- **Effective criticism depends heavily on how it is said.** Never begin a sentence with "You always..." That is too accusatory, and too impossible to answer. When you cause the person to react in a defensive manner, it's just the same as closing the employee's ears and ensuring that he or she will repeat the offending behavior. Don't look for a winner and a loser. When you have successfully resolved a conflict between staffers, it should be viewed as a win-win resolution for both parties. No one should walk away feeling that his or her side of the dispute was ignored or given short thrift.
- **Don't focus on the past.** It's not constructive to list past grievances. Instead, focus on the future and how to make things better.
- **Listen Up, Keep Your Focus.** Listen closely without making snap judgments. In the heat of conflict, the real issues can be buried. Even if they're out in the open, people can be deaf to them. Instead, look for a common ground that both sides can agree on.
- **Don't flail around.** Know what your objective is. If you feel things slipping out of control in an argument, keep this objective in mind. For example, what exactly is it you want the other person to do? How do you want his or her behavior to change? Don't Feed Into The Anger
- **Don't be negative.** As the mediator, you have to keep the larger picture in mind. Once you have clarified and stated the problem, follow up with a positive way to solve it.
- **Don't be disrespectful.** Name-calling never solved any conflicts.

- **Don't aggravate angry personalities.** Some people may be "cruising for a bruising." Don't give it to them. These workers may have a gripe that you can handle before conflict erupts. So talk to them and see if there is a reason for their anger.
- **Don't pick a bad time.** If you need to "have it out," pick a time and place where the atmosphere is conducive to quiet discussion. This may not be the moment that the conflict first surfaces.

Understanding Conflict

Conflict is "a situation of competition in which the parties are aware of the incompatibility of potential future positions and in which each party wishes to occupy a position which is incompatible with the wishes of the other." Conflict is viewed as a cycle: "As with any social process, there are causes; also, there is a core process, which has results or effects. These effects feed back to affect the causes." To understand conflict further, the situation must include elements of interdependence, emotions, perceptions, and behaviors. For example, conflict occurs between parties whose tasks are interdependent, who are angry with each other, who perceive the other party as being at fault, and whose actions cause a business problem.

Conflict can be constructive and healthy for an organization. It can aid in developing individuals and improving the organization by building on the individual assets of its members. Conflict can bring about underlying issues. It can force people to confront possible defects in a solution and choose a better one. The understanding of real interests, goals and needs is enhanced and ongoing communication around those issues is induced. In addition, it can prevent premature and inappropriate resolution of conflict. Constructive conflict occurs when people change and grow personally from the conflict, involvement of the individuals affected by the conflict is increased, cohesiveness is formed among team members, and a solution to the problem is found. However, if conflict is not managed properly, it can be detrimental to an organization by threatening organizational unity, business partnerships, team relationships, and interpersonal connections. Deconstructive conflict occurs when a decision has not been found and the problem remains, energy is taken away from more important activities or issues, morale of teams or individuals is destroyed, and groups of people or teams are polarized.

Destructive conflict has a predictable pattern known as the Drama Triangle. By learning how to identify these unproductive roles and how to effectively handle each role player, managers can prevent some conflicts from occurring and resolve those that do. Most individuals know how to assume the following three roles:

Persecutor refers to a person who uses aggressive behavior against another person, attacking the intended victim. An attack can be direct or indirect and be

physical, verbal, or both. The persecutor's actions deliver a message that "you are not okay" while making the persecutor feel righteous and superior.

Victim refers to a person who uses nonassertive behavior so others view them as "I'm not okay." This behavior encourages others to either rescue or persecute the victim. Victims will feel helpless, inadequate, sad, scared, or guilty. The victim role is often used because the individual is feeling stressed, has low self-esteem, or is being persecuted by another.

Rescuer refers to a person who uses either nonassertive or aggressive behavior. Individuals become rescuers because they will not say "no" and unwillingly assume the responsibility of solving the victim's problem. In contrast, others will assume the rescuer role to demonstrate superiority over the victim.

These roles are learned in early childhood and are used throughout adulthood. They involve the perception of oneself or someone else as inadequate or not acceptable. The aggressive and nonassertive behaviors that are present in these roles lead to win-lose outcomes and do not provide an opportunity for a win-win resolution.

It is important for a project manager to understand the dynamics of conflict before being able to resolve it. The internal characteristics of conflict include perception of the goal, perception of the other, view of the other's actions, definition of problem, communication, and internal group dynamics.

Perception of the goal becomes a problem when success becomes competitive or "doing better than the other guy." The focus is placed on the solution rather than attaining the goal.

Perception of the other can create conflict when the attitude becomes "us versus them." Similarities and differences are emphasized causing division within a group.

View of other's actions can be a problem when the situation is competitive instead of cooperative. Behavior can be suspicious in a competitive environment.

Definition of problem can result in conflict when the size of the problem is escalated, issues are misconstrued, and original issues are lost.

Communication in a competitive environment can cause mistrust and information may be withheld or may be lacking. Communication is not open and honest.

Internal group dynamics can be negative when the group structure is centralized and rigid rather than safe and open. Conformity is emphasized and tasks dominate over the needs of the team members.

These characteristics can strongly influence the behavior style of group members and affect the potential outcome of the conflict. In some instances, the project

manager's lack of skills to effectively manage and resolve conflict can be the problem.

Approaches to Conflict Resolution

In *Project Management: A Systems Approach to Planning, Scheduling, and Controlling*, five modes for conflict resolution are explained and the situations when they are best utilized are identified. These modes are Confronting, Compromising, Smoothing, Forcing, and Avoiding.

Confronting is also described as problem solving, integrating, collaborating or win-win style. It involves the conflicting parties meeting face-to-face and collaborating to reach an agreement that satisfies the concerns of both parties. This style involves open and direct communication which should lead the way to solving the problem. Confronting should be used when:

- Both parties need to win.
- You want to decrease cost.
- You want create a common power base.
- Skills are complementary.
- Time is sufficient.
- Trust is present.
- Learning is the ultimate goal.

Compromising is also described as a "give and take" style. Conflicting parties bargain to reach a mutually acceptable solution. Both parties give up something in order to reach a decision and leave with some degree of satisfaction. Compromising should be used when:

- Both parties need to win.
- You are in a deadlock.
- Time is not sufficient.
- You want to maintain the relationship among the involved parties.
- You will get nothing if you do not compromise.
- Stakes are moderate.

Smoothing is also referred to as accommodating or obliging style. In this approach, the areas of agreement are emphasized and the areas of disagreement are downplayed. Conflicts are not always resolved in the

smoothing mode. A party may sacrifice its own concerns or goals in order to satisfy the concerns or goals of the other party. Smoothing should be used when:

- Goal to be reached is overarching.
- You want to create obligation for a trade-off at a later time.
- Stakes are low.
- Liability is limited.
- Any solution is adequate.
- You want to be harmonious and create good will.
- You would lose anyway.
- You want to gain time.

Forcing is also known as competing, controlling, or dominating style. Forcing occurs when one party goes all out to win its position while ignoring the needs and concerns of the other party. As the intensity of a conflict increases, the tendency for a forced conflict is more likely. This results in a win-lose situation where one party wins at the expense of the other party. Forcing should be used when:

- A "do or die" situation is present.
- Stakes are high.
- Important principles are at stake.
- Relationship among parties is not important.
- A quick decision must be made.

Avoiding is also described as withdrawal style. This approach is viewed as postponing an issue for later or withdrawing from the situation altogether. It is regarded as a temporary solution because the problem and conflict continue to reoccur over and over again. Avoiding should be used when:

- You can not win.
- Stakes are low.
- Stakes are high, but you are not prepared.
- You want to gain time.
- You want to maintain neutrality or reputation.

- You think problem will go away.
- You win by delaying.

Researchers examined the impact of the conflict resolution styles used by individuals in shaping their work environment and affecting the level of ongoing conflict and stress. Results of the study showed that individuals who use a certain style to conflicts can create environments with varied degrees of conflicts. Individuals who use more of a confronting style create an environment with lower levels of task conflict, which reduces relationship conflict and stress. Whereas, individuals who use more of the forcing or avoiding styles tend to create an environment with more task conflict, which increases relationship conflict and stress. The study suggests conflict develops not only in environmental circumstances but in the styles used by individuals when confronted with a conflict. The manner in which a person responds to organizational dissension and uncertainty will influence the responses of others and the individual's work experience.

Another study went a step further and examined the relationship between the three forms of organizational justice (procedural, distributive, and interactional) and the conflict resolution styles. The researchers concluded that higher interactional justice was related to greater use of the confronting style when distributive justice was low and procedural justice was high. Use of the avoiding style was positively related to distributive justice. This study suggests when employees perceive organizational justice; they are likely to use more cooperative modes, such as confronting, smoothing, and compromising, in dealing with conflict. Results from this study have implications for organizations. Managers at all levels of an organization should be attentive to enhancing employee perceptions of organizational justice in order to encourage the use of more cooperative styles for organizational conflict management.

Barki and Hartwick tested a model of how members of information systems development (ISD) projects perceive interpersonal conflict and examined the relationships between interpersonal conflict, conflict management styles, and ISD outcomes. In the study, interpersonal conflict was defined as "a phenomenon that occurs between interdependent parties as they experience negative emotional reactions to perceived disagreements and interference with the attainment of their goals." The results suggest that individuals' assessments of interpersonal conflict were formed based on disagreement, interference, and negative emotion. Interdependence was not a factor in their assessment. Negative emotion was found to be a significant part of an individuals' perception of interpersonal conflict. Although conflict management styles were shown to have positive effects on ISD outcomes, the negative effects of interpersonal conflict on the outcomes were not alleviated. Regardless of how the conflict was managed or resolved, the study demonstrated that the impact of interpersonal conflict was perceived to be negative. The researchers concluded that management and satisfactory

resolution of interpersonal conflict are important. However, prevention of interpersonal conflict should be the greater focus.

Al-Tabtabai and colleagues undermine the modes of conflict resolution and propose a conflict resolution technique using a cognitive analysis approach. This approach identifies a main source of conflict as the cognitive differences between parties. Feedback is presented that gives analysis of each individual's judgment and comparisons with the counterpart's judgment. This cognitive feedback provides insight to conflicting parties and gives them an opportunity to reach an acceptable resolution to the conflict. The proposed systematic methodology to conflict resolution identifies and measures the cues, distal variable, and judgments and determines the relationships between these variables. The six steps of this methodology are listed below.

- Identification of the Conflict Domain
- Generation of Conflict Cases
- Exercise of Judgment
- Analysis of the Results
- Communication of the Judgment Differences (Cognitive Feedback)
- Negotiation Among Conflicting Parties

The use of the cognitive analysis approach resulted in more agreement among the parties in conflict. Cognitive feedback provided information on reasons why the disagreement occurred among the parties and on areas that needed to be addressed to reach an agreement. This approach allowed those involved in the conflict to concentrate on the real differences that provoked the disagreement rather than only discussing the effects of the conflicting situation. The findings from this study suggest the use of cognitive feedback can be effectively applied to conflict resolution.

Active listening is a proven technique managers can use to help resolve conflict. Developing this skill takes practice, but it can be extremely effective when mastered. Listening allows the conflict to take its natural course by giving individuals the opportunity to disagree, express strong opinions, and show passion for ideas. A respect for individual differences is demonstrated and an environment of understanding is fostered. Listening is helpful in achieving a winning resolution by enabling an employee to identify the criteria that is considered an acceptable outcome. When a manager is able to understand the needs and interests of individuals, the chances of satisfactorily resolving the conflict for both parties are increased. As a result of this process, trust and a relationship bond will form preparing individuals to listen also to the needs of the manager.

An awareness of the potential approaches to conflict resolution and the understanding of their consequences can provide managers with an invaluable set of tools to create an optimal work environment.

Conclusion

Conflict is not necessarily unfavorable when properly managed. Several advantages have been identified such as increasing personal growth and morale, enhancing communication, and producing better outcomes. However, conflict can be the decline of an organization if it is not effectively managed. The challenge for organizational leaders and managers is to try to maintain the right balance and intensity of conflict. By utilizing proper management principles, understanding the dynamics of conflict, and learning approaches to conflict resolution, managers will be able to establish an environment in which creativity and innovation is encouraged and organization goals are accomplished.

Resources:

National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1509 16th Street NW, Washington, DC 20019

Association for Conflict Resolution, 1527 New Hampshire Avenue NW, Third Floor, Washington, DC 20036

Better-Work Supervisor, November 24, 1997, published by Clement Communications, Inc.

Ford J. Workplace conflict: facts and figures.
:<http://mediate.com/workplace/ford1.cfm>

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Wall JA Jr, Callister RR. Conflict and its management. *Journal of Management*(21:3), 1995, pp 515-558

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