

Conflict Management



In a controversy the instant we feel anger we have already ceased striving for the truth, and have begun striving for ourselves.

~ The Buddha ~

Human conflict arises when one or more of our most basic physical or psychological needs are unheard, unmet, violated or perceived to be violated in some way; it is resolved when the person either accepts the 'violation', or the 'violation' is recognised and corrected in an acceptable way. But the acceptance or correction has to be real for the person in conflict and what they see as reasonable and acceptable is framed by their perceptions and emotions.

The ability to deal with conflict effectively is directly related to overall management success and is just one aspect of relationship management¹. Too little conflict can indicate a stagnant organisation or disinterested or demoralised project team, whereas too much conflict indicates a dysfunctional team.

Vijay Verma in *Managing the Project Team* refers to three views of conflict:

- The traditional view that conflict is bad and must be eliminated through the use of authority. This is not a good view for project teams and projects.
- The interactionist view is that conflict is desirable and necessary for high performance teams. Conflict should be encouraged. This is NOT the PMBOK® Guide view and has limited general acceptance.
- The contemporary view is that conflict is inevitable, it may be positive and it may be negative but it must be managed to be beneficial. Conflict can be a sign that the project team is committed (this is the PMBOK view).

The essentials of conflict management discussed in more detail below are:

- Stop listen and think.
- Put yourself in their shoes.
- Understand what they want and why.
- Be assertive - attack the problem not the people.
- Build constructive relationships - any solution will require cooperation and trust.
- In difficult situations obtain expert assistance.

But remember, conflict triggers the stress response and the release of stress hormones that suppress the higher-order brain functions needed to resolve conflict effectively such as perspective-taking, empathy, judgement and reasoning skills. Regaining your sense of rationality is first step to a resolution, getting the other parties

¹ For more on *managing contractual disputes* see:
https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1049_Dispute_Management.pdf

into the same frame of thinking is the next critical step. Until people are prepared to work towards a resolution, designing an outcome people can live with is difficult, if not impossible.

Understanding the conflict

Conflict management is a key skill, particularly if you are not involved in the actual dispute, but are managing one or more of the disputants. Before you can deal with the conflict you need to understand its scope:

- What is the conflict about?
- Who is involved in the conflict? Are there ‘backers’, ‘puppet masters’ or ‘supporters’ encouraging the immediately obvious protagonists? Are there others who should be involved who are avoiding the dispute (but who are essential to the solution or will be affected by the outcome)?
- What is the root cause² of the dispute?
- Why has it occurred? How has it managed to get to this stage? There has usually been a management failure.
- What is the actual or potential impact of the conflict? How much effort is sensible to expend on the dispute (expending a disproportionate amount of effort could be more detrimental than the conflict itself)?
- Are you involved you are you seeking to manage the resolution of a conflict between others? If you are involved do you need the help of an impartial third party? If you are managing a dispute between others do you have the leadership, authority or influence to make a difference to the behaviours of the disputants (or should you involve others)?

From this understanding you can determine the best way forward to resolve the conflict.

Resolving conflicts

If you are involved in the conflict situation, you can choose to apply one of the following basic approaches with the noted likely outcome on achieving your goals and maintaining the relationship:

Method	Achieving goals?	Maintain relationships?
Forcing / Directing: ‘do it’ Requires the use of your power or authority	High	Very low
Smoothing / Accommodating: Emphasises agreement, minimises disputes	Low	High
Compromise / Reconcile: Both sides give something up	Medium	Medium
Problem solving / Collaboration: also referred to as ‘confronting’. A Joint approach to the problem in order to find a mutually acceptable solution (Win-Win ³)	High	High
Withdrawal / Avoidance / Acceptance: You withdraw from the argument ⁴	Very low	Low

² Disputes are a step beyond negotiations or problem solving to resolve a difference. Personality, perceptions and ‘history’ almost always play a part. You need to drill down to understand the people and the root cause. For more on *root cause analysis* see: https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1085_Root_Cause_Analysis.pdf

³ For more on **Win-Win** see: https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1032_Win-Win_Negotiating.pdf

⁴ This may be a tactical withdrawal to select a better time for the ‘fight’, or simply a decision to ‘pick your battles’.



All of these options have a time and place:

- **Forcing / Directing:** Exert your authority and positional power (or get a person with the necessary power) to insist the issue is addressed and a solution imposed. Typically, this is the way conflicts are resolved during an emergency where decisions are required ‘immediately’⁵. However, this may only be a short term solution, as use of authority can leave one or both sides feeling disenfranchised - what seems fair and reasonable to you may not be perceived that way by the disputants⁶.
- **Smoothing / Accommodating:** Is not a solution but can buy time for emotions to cool and the protagonists to come to their own solution.
- **Compromise / Reconcile:** Both sides agree to give a little to resolve the dispute but this approach rarely leads to an optimal solution.
- **Problem solving / Collaboration:** Involves both sides working together to understand the other’s position; recognising what might be best for any one person is not necessarily best overall or for the longer term relationships. Win-win negotiating requires strength of purpose.
- **Withdrawal / Avoidance / Acceptance:** has a range of options that may be useful:
 - **Accept and settle:** Give the other party what they want. It removes the conflict at least cost but could have future ramifications⁷.
 - **Accept and ignore:** The effort required to fix the problem, if it can be fixed, far outweighs the damage the conflict is doing. Accept it, move on, but watch for signs of escalation in case the impact increases
 - **Delay:** Similar to ‘smoothing / accommodating’ to give everyone a chance to reflect on the situation. Once the *heat* has dissipated most problems can be rectified more easily.
 - **Accommodation:** This is the path of least pain where one side accepts the other’s views or position (whether or not the actually agree). But the acceptance has to be genuine to avoid a repeat of the dispute at a later date.

Regardless of the method chosen, the resolution requires some level of negotiation if you plan to achieve a sensible outcome⁸. Conflicts are events within a larger process. They are parts of a system in which any action anywhere can affect the system everywhere. Doing something that may give a short term gain, without thinking of the long term results is dangerous. You need to develop a solution that will avoid hostility or result in active resistance, lack of motivation, or opposition.

There is always more to any conflict than the left brained components like time, money and product quality; the right brain components of feelings, pride, trust, etc. must also be considered to find the optimal resolution⁹. An optimal resolution is the one that leads to an outcome that meets as many of the parties’ acceptance criteria as possible and results in a stronger relationship among the parties. The stronger relationship is important because it will help reduce the volume of conflicts going forward, ease of resolving those conflicts that do arise and improve the quality of the resolutions.

⁵ Directing is very closely aligned with the command / dictatorial approach to **decision making** - the person with authority or power directs the solution. See: https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1053_Decision_Making.pdf

⁶ **Process and procedural fairness** are essential if you are going to impose a decision on the parties, see: https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/Mag_Articles/SA1029_Process_Fairness.pdf

⁷ Being seen as a ‘soft touch’ may encourage others to raise disingenuous disputes or encourage the protagonist to ‘come back for more’. You need to understand the person and the situation both in the short and long term, see: **Know when to lose:** https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/Mag_Articles/SA1016_Know_when_to_lose.pdf

⁸ For more on **negotiating** see: https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1024_Negotiating.pdf

⁹ For more on **Emotional Intelligence** see: https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1008_Emotional_Intelligence.pdf



Within this framework, **problem solving**¹⁰ is the ideal option focused on a Win-Win¹¹ outcome. However, being a practical realist you need to accept the fact that there are circumstances where win-win solutions are not possible. Win-win needs the conflict to exist in a relationship that has the following core values:

- Mutual benefit & Non-harming
- Trust
- Honesty
- Respect
- Optimal resolutions
- Non-attachment.

When these values are not present the probability of a Win-Win outcome is low and if the relationship cannot be enhanced to develop these characteristics other options may need to be considered but only as a last resort. Conflict management built around 'forcing', that values winning at all cost, devalues harmonious relationships and the long term benefits of a forced outcome are typically less effective than those that are based on confronting problems collaboratively. Resolving conflicts by forcing a solution on the other party risks failure, not only in the current situation but into the future and always leaves a dissatisfied opponent who is going to be around for the long term.

Remember to make sure every one agrees the way forward at the end... and follow-through on all agreements. This helps to ensure the conflict is resolved and also builds trust that will help defuse similar situations in the future.

Non-attachment in conflict management

Attachment is neither good nor bad. There is constructive attachment and destructive attachment. In psychology, attachment is the capacity to form and maintain healthy emotional relationships. It is a foundation for healthy living throughout life. This kind of attachment is clearly a good thing. Its absence in childhood leads to serious problems. In more general usage, attachment is binding to something, for example, a loved one or an idea.

In Buddhist thinking attachment is seen as the cause of suffering. It can be attachment to the idea of wanting things to be different than the way they can be. It can be attachment to the way things are. We are attached when we must have what we like or avoid things we don't like, no matter what.

Note that the wanting or desire is not the issue. The issue is the attachment or the idea that things must be as we want them. Attachment allows wanting to get in the way of skilful thinking and action. By adopting a position of non-attachment towards ideas and positions you are free to work towards a mutually beneficial outcome. Attachment is also linked to stress.

Stress in conflict management

Stress may be good or bad depending on the situation. What is important is to be aware of the stress as it arises. You need to sense your thoughts and feeling before they burst into behaviour.

¹⁰ **Problem solving techniques** are discussed in WP1013, see:
https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1013_Problem_Solving.pdf

¹¹ For more on **Win-Win** negotiating see:
https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1032_Win-Win_Negotiating.pdf



Watch for the signs of stress, for example unpleasant thoughts and feelings, perhaps a tightening of the chest or stomach, maybe a shortness of breath; anger; fear. If you miss these, watch for the behavioural signs - you've raised your voice, banged your fist on the table, become sarcastic or uncharacteristically silent.

Recognize that all stress is, is a barometer to let you know how you feel about something. It is the result of your attachment to an idea. Ask yourself, "What idea do I have that is causing this stress?" Asking only requires a short moment. Doing so immediately creates some "space" around the feelings. The act of asking immediately creates the opportunity to stand back and take a more mindful versus reactive approach.

Ideas for a 'mindful' approach to conflict management

There is no single definition for 'mindfulness' however it is generally agreed the practice of mindfulness finds its roots in the teaching of Buddhism with a focus on maintaining a calm awareness of one's body, feelings, mind and virtues in day-to-day life. This translates as an ability to increase awareness of, and respond skilfully to, mental processes¹² which contribute to 'emotional stress and maladaptive behaviour'. Being mindful allows you to focus on achieving the optimum outcomes from the task in hand, be aware of the feelings of others and be aware of how you are presenting to them. Some useful strategies to be mindful in a conflict (or potential conflict) include:

- Give yourself a cooling off period. Don't approach a difficult person when you're angry.
- Don't take the 'hook' when people try to bring you into a conversation that you don't want to have or aren't ready to address. Simply say, "This isn't a good time to talk about that." Or, "We've gone over that before. You know my stand."
- Always be prepared to take a 'time-out'. If you or the other person is starting to get emotional, tell them you need to take five minutes to collect your thoughts and go and make a coffee or for a walk - it is surprising how a short walk (or a long one) can help you relax. Even though you asked for the five minutes, it is really for the other party to cool off as well - it will help you both to calm down and reflect on what has happened.
- Put your ego aside. Listen first¹³. Often people just want to know someone has considered their point of view. You lose nothing but a few minutes by listening to what someone has to say.
- 'Own' your language. Instead of saying 'You really screwed this up'. Try, 'I see some ways to improve this'. Defuse the situation. When you restart your conversation, start with a disarming comment such as 'Sorry. I have been under pressure'. or 'Let's start over again'. This will make the atmosphere more positive.
- Immediately work to find common ground. What can you agree about? Once you articulate that, you will better be able to address the areas of contention.
- Define how you'd both be better served by reaching agreement.
- Keep the conversation on track. Don't allow the other person to throw in the kitchen sink from left field. Simply say, "We're getting into another area. Let's get back to the original question."
- Deal with facts and observations, not inferences and judgments. Arguing about facts is difficult, however.
- Use silence effectively – take a break / go to the balcony – especially if you feel yourself descending into a shouting match and trying to talk over the top of the other party. Silence breaks the cycle and allows more productive negotiations. Learn to recognise your physical symptoms (eg, a hot flush) indicating you are about to 'jump in' over the top of someone annoying you (this

¹² For more on the value of applying effective **Social and Emotional Intelligence** see: https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1008_Emoional_Intellegence.pdf

¹³ For more on **Active Listening** see: https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1012_Active_Listening.pdf



is a physiological reaction) and resist the urge to speak until the symptoms pass (also see ‘Don’t Argue’ below).

- Watch your body language. Focus on your body language. Use open stances; keep your hands out of your pockets and never fold your arms. Use slow hand movements. Use a passive voice. Maintain good eye contact. Listen carefully and watch their body language as well.
- Don’t worry about “why” they behave the way they do. It really isn’t important. Instead, focus on how you can work with this person.

The Triangle of Truth

Resolving a conflict has never been an easy task — whether you’re dealing with your boss, your colleagues, or family members. Veteran journalist, corporate coach, consultant and speaker Lisa Earle McLeod recommends an alternative in her new book *The Triangle of Truth The Surprisingly Simple Secret to Resolving Conflicts Large and Small* (Perigee; January 2010). ‘Instead of trying to compromise in the middle, or the more common scenario, fight about who’s right and who’s wrong,’ writes McLeod, ‘the Triangle of Truth provides a model for redirecting your energy. It points you toward a solution at the top of the triangle that honours the truth on both sides.’

The seven principles that make up the Triangle are:

- **Principle 1: Embrace ‘And’** – Using the Triangle successfully means eliminating either/or thinking. By harnessing the power of ‘and’, we enable ourselves to consider ideas different from our own, leading to solutions that either/or thinkers would have missed.
- **Principle 2: Make Peace With Ambiguity** – Fear dates back to our prehistoric ancestors and our primal instinct to survive, and whether the source of our fear is real or imagined, fear holds us in the either/or mindset. Our brain locks on to what we believe to be true, and, as a result, we expend every ounce of energy defending it. This, of course, prohibits us from hearing any other idea or side to the argument, making it impossible to implement the Triangle of Truth.
- **Principle 3: Hold Space For Other Perspectives** – In order to achieve your objectives, you must consider the objectives of others. While it’s easy to become consumed by our own ambitious goals, ignoring the goals that are driving someone else prohibits you from working as a team to get what you both want.
- **Principle 4: Seek Higher Ground** – Seeking higher ground requires us to look beyond the conflict or issue at hand to see the bigger picture, considering the full context of the situation. It involves elevating our minds above the thinking that there are only two choices, either A or B, and allows us to create a different choice — one that helps us achieve what we really want.
- **Principle 5: Discern Intent** – Solutions are based on what someone believes is the best way to solve a problem. Whether or not you agree with their solution, it’s critical that you try to understand their intent. Chances are their solution wasn’t derived from any intent to ruin you, the project or the company.
- **Principle 6: Elevate Others** – Helping others elevate their thinking by going beyond the narrow “what” and “when” questions to the more expansive “how” and “why” questions allows us to all think more deeply. By elevating our thinking, we are able to think more creatively, assimilate multiple ideas, uncover the core truths behind proposed solutions and, naturally, solve conflicts more effectively and without the drama.
- **Principle 7: Be The Peace** – Go beyond being a peacekeeper and instead being a peacemaker. Rather than simply keeping the conflict under wraps, we must learn how to embrace other ideas and assimilate our conflicting ideas into a solution that far surpasses either idea.



The Five As Technique

This problem-solving technique allows conflicts to be resolved through an exploratory process. The process includes:

- **Assessment:** identify problems; collect information; define ideal outcomes
- **Acknowledgement:** encourage mutual understanding; build empathy; listen actively
- **Attitude:** discover stereotypes, including cultural ones; accept and understand differences and their root causes
- **Action:** select best resolution alternative based on shared information; be aware of potential new sources of conflict
- **Analysis:** summarize actions to be taken; ensure everyone's concerns have been addressed; monitor the process on an ongoing basis

Receiving Feedback

Giving and receiving feedback is essential for continuous improvement but can also be a prime source of conflict. When receiving feedback, non-attachment is essential for you to engage effectively in the conversation and maximise the benefits to your performance. However, sometimes the person providing feedback does not have the skills needed to develop and deliver constructive input. In these instances, you must be able to employ both effective listening and active listening skills¹⁴ to achieve a professional outcome.

The key things to remember for optimal results are:

1. Acknowledge the facts.
2. Stay calm and focus on listening. (Avoid arguing and/or being defensive.)
3. Offer opinions only when asked.
4. Take time to absorb the message before you react.
(If a question is posed, ask whether it is OK to answer it later so you have time to process.)
5. Make sure you understand the message before evaluating it.
6. Be attentive to the other person's point of view.
7. Say "thank you."

Don't Argue

Arguing achieves predictable outcomes: it solidifies each person's stance, wastes time and deteriorates relationships¹⁵. Which are the exact opposite of what you're trying to achieve! The solution is to stop arguing.

- Resist the temptation to start an argument in the first place. If you feel strongly about something in the moment, that's probably a good sign that you need time to think before trying to communicate it.
- If someone tries to draw you into an argument? Don't take the bait. Change the subject or politely let the person know you don't want to engage in a discussion about it.
- If you're in the middle of an argument and realize it's going nowhere stop arguing and start listening.

¹⁴ For more on **Active listening** see: https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1012_Active_Listening.pdf

¹⁵ For more on managing emotions in conflicts see **Why are they (you) fighting?:** https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/Mag_Articles/SA1026_Why_are_they_fighting.pdf



Listening.

Simply acknowledge the other person and what they saying without any intention of refuting their position. If you're interested, you can ask questions to better understand their position. Listening has the opposite effect of arguing. Arguing closes people down. Listening slows them down and then it opens them up. When someone feels heard, they relax and become more interested in hearing you. Listening is the best way to shift a perspective and crate the possibility of changing the person's mind and maybe your own.

When you want to leave the conversation, say something like "Thanks for that perspective" or "I'll have to think about that," and walk away or change the subject.

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