Is conflict inevitable in the workplace? If you are like most leaders, your answer will be “yes.” Once that threshold is crossed, the only issue left is whether conflict will lead to good or bad results. Most people view conflict as something negative to be avoided. When asked, they readily agree that this approach rarely works and usually leads to unproductive outcomes. So, what does it take to address conflict competently? Conflict management involves a complex range of skills that are not inborn—they need to be learned.

In this article, we examine the importance of developing the competence of leaders, managers, and employees to be able to deal with this inevitable part of work life. We review the costs of managing conflict poorly and the benefits of dealing with it effectively, because adults will not put effort into developing skills unless it results in benefits they care about. Most importantly, we will look at the cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and normative skills that need to be employed to help people become competent in getting the best out of conflict while at the same time avoiding its most challenging aspects.

THE VALUE OF MANAGING CONFLICT EFFECTIVELY

When most people are faced with conflict, they tend to avoid addressing it and hope that it goes away; they do not consider that there may be value in dealing with it. In organizational contexts, the most effective manner of getting the value out of conflict involves linking conflict management with strategic goals. A company’s leaders or a division’s managers focus their attention on achieving the strategic goals that they have typically been involved in developing. They will be aware of many challenges that could thwart their efforts, but they are typically not as aware of one particular challenge—poorly managed conflict.

In the nuclear power industry, plants need to be shut down periodically for routine maintenance and repairs. These outages can be expensive, especially when they last too long. So one of the strategies for the plants is to complete the outage and be back in production as expeditiously as possible. Crews can work long shifts during the outages, and there is strong motivation to complete the work in a timely manner. When conflicts arise, they can slow down work and cause expensive delays. One company effectively reduced the time of its outage by providing conflict-management training to managers and workers. In that case, the strategic goal of getting the plant back into production intersected the ability to manage conflict effectively.

If cost savings are a strategic goal, then improving the management of conflict can play a key role. Significant savings can come from a variety of sources. A number of studies have found that managers spend 20 percent or more of their time dealing...
with conflicts. Significant turnover can be linked to supervisor/employee conflict. Both absenteeism and presenteeism can rise when conflicts are not managed well. Grievances, complaints, lawsuits, vandalism, and even violence can be linked to poorly managed conflict, and all of these can increase cost and decrease productivity.

From a human resources perspective, improving the success rates of high-potential leaders might be a strategic goal. These people have the talent and the drive. At the same time, they can lack the people skills that can make the difference between success and failure, and poor conflict-management skills can derail them. If they are able to obtain and improve effective conflict-management skills early in their career, it can help them as they advance within the organization and enable them to serve as good role models for those who follow them.

When conflict is managed well, it can lead to improvements in creativity and innovation, higher-quality decision-making, and improved implementation. The creativity and innovation come from more robust discussions where one idea leads to another, and the process begets new and better solutions. These same discussions can allow for more rigorous vetting of the ideas, which leads to better decisions. When people are actively involved in the discussions, they feel like they have been part of the solution and are more willing to participate in the implementation of decisions even when they are not their preferred outcomes.

**CONFLICT COMPETENCE**

Leadership competencies contribute to improved performance. Conflict competence enables people to address inevitable conflicts in a manner that produces better outcomes and improved relationships. Individual conflict competence involves enhanced self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and the use of constructive communication behaviors. Organizational conflict competence leverages these individual skills by creating a culture that recognizes conflict as a natural event and legitimizes constructive approaches for addressing it.

The individual conflict-competence model (see Exhibit 1) envisions people being able to cool down by managing emotions, slow down, and reflect on what is happening and then engage constructively with the other person to resolve the problem.

The cool-down phase allows people to regain emotional balance before engaging with the other person. Without such balance, it becomes too easy to engage in fight-or-flight behaviors that can escalate the situation by causing the other person to react negatively.

Conflict is often a very complex and chaotic process. People’s thoughts are skewed by their emotions, which are often occasioned...
by their negative interpretations of other people’s actions. When they can slow down and reflect on what is happening, they can deconstruct the conflict and become clearer about what they are experiencing and how they are thinking and feeling about the situation. It also provides an opportunity to consider what they want for themselves and others in the conflict.

At this point, it becomes possible to successfully engage constructively in problem-solving efforts with the other person. This requires the use of a number of constructive communications techniques that foster understanding by promoting good listening and speaking, development and vetting of creative solutions, and effective implementation of the solutions.

A series of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral skills underlies these elements of conflict competency.

UNDERSTANDING CONFLICT—COGNITIVE FACTORS

As has been mentioned, it is critical for people to believe there is value in developing the skills associated with conflict competence. An examination of the benefits of effectively managed conflict and a review of the costs associated with conflict that is poorly handled can help people recognize the value of taking the subject seriously.

In addition, improved understanding of the dynamics of conflict and one’s own responses to it help deepen an appreciation of what steps will be needed to improve a person’s emotional and behavioral skills. Whether by using interviews or assessment instruments, improved self-awareness is a first step on the road to conflict competence.

First-generation conflict assessments focused on measuring conflict styles, broad views of a person’s general orientation toward conflict. These help individuals know whether they approach conflict by avoiding, accommodating, competing, compromising, or collaborating with the other person. By understanding their prominent styles, people can adjust their approach in cases where the style would not be effective.

Newer instruments like the Conflict Dynamics Profile® (CDP) focus on conflict behaviors. They provide a more nuanced assessment of the behavioral patterns that people use in conflict settings. The CDP measures the frequency with which people use seven constructive responses (perspective taking, creating solutions, expressing emotions, reaching out, reflective thinking, delay responding, and adapting) and eight destructive behaviors (winning at all costs, displaying anger, demeaning others, retaliating, avoiding, yielding, hiding emotions, and self-criticizing). It also measures a person’s conflict “hot buttons”—behaviors in others that tend to trigger negative emotions in an individual and lead to reactive use of destructive behaviors. Awareness of hot buttons and behaviors helps illuminate links between the emotional and behavioral aspects of conflict and allows individuals to develop action plans to address both aspects.

MANAGING EMOTIONS

Conflict is replete with emotion. It is difficult to respond effectively when one is under
the grip of negative emotions. They drive us to react in destructive ways that escalate conflict by causing further negative reactions from others involved in the conflict. As a consequence, understanding hot buttons and working on emotional self-regulation techniques becomes a critical component of conflict competence.

When people become more aware of those hot buttons that trigger negative reactions, they become less susceptible to being blindsided in conflict. Reflecting on the values underlying hot buttons helps bring clarity about why certain behaviors can upset us. This tends to lessen the intensity of the hot button in future encounters. The hot-button reactions do not go away completely, but rather they become more manageable.

A number of techniques can be used to manage emotions once they occur. Most of these are based on the idea that our emotions are often driven by how we think about a situation. If someone behaves in a manner you believe to be offensive, you may get angry in large measure because you think that the behavior was meant to harm you. Although this may be the case, it may also be the case that the other person was doing something he or she thought was acceptable or helpful and without any malice intended. The challenge becomes discerning what is really happening before acting out of your own anger. Being open to exploring the intentions of the other person becomes extremely difficult when we are upset.

One approach to cooling down involves seeking alternative interpretations to what is happening. This technique, called cognitive reappraisal, involves considering other possible explanations of the other person’s actions that do not involve hostile intent. When other answers are considered, brain functioning is changed, and negative emotions begin to be transformed into a neutral or even positive mood.2

A second approach, which is sometimes used in cardiac rehabilitation programs, exchanges positive thoughts for negative ones. “Going to your happy place” involves thinking of something that is pleasant or uplifting instead of focusing on the thoughts about the conflict that have been getting you upset. People respond well to this relatively simple process that can be used whenever negative emotions are causing them to feel off balance.

If the process of thinking generates the problematic emotions in the first place, the third technique addresses the issue by replacing thinking with observing. The process, called mindfulness, involves stepping back from mulling over the issue that is causing the upset and just observing the thoughts and feelings that come up in a nonjudgmental manner. It looks at these thoughts and emotions as passing phenomena that are more ephemeral when viewed from a distance. As with cognitive reappraisal, mindfulness approaches have been shown to change brain function in a way that allows negative emotions to recede and a more positive mood to reemerge. With it comes an emotional balance that allows people to be able to engage the conflict more effectively.

**REFLECTING ON ISSUES**

Conflict can be a chaotic jumble of thoughts and feelings. Clarity is often lacking, and confusion holds sway. When this happens, slowing down and reflecting before rushing to resolve the problem can prove very effective. On the one hand, slowing down provides time and space to allow emotions to calm.
As balance is regained, it becomes easier to gain insight into the dynamics in play in the conflict.

Reflection clarifies conflict boundaries—helping show who is involved, what their interests are, and whether their interests are being taken into account. It also helps provide a deeper understanding of one’s own experience of the conflict, which can help in preparing for a conversation with others involved in it. The reflection allows one to explore how he or she is thinking about the situation and what data are being relied on to support his or her interpretation. It also enables the person to better understand his or her feelings and the desired goal or objective for the situation.

**BEHAVING CONSTRUCTIVELY**

A number of constructive behaviors can be used to better understand the conflict from different perspectives, develop possible solutions for it, and yet those solutions for optimal outcomes. At the same time, several destructive behaviors can cause tensions to escalate and conflict to be prolonged. From a behavioral approach, conflict competence involves reducing one’s use of destructive behaviors and increasing reliance on constructive ones.

Destructive behaviors tend to fall into two categories—active and passive. Active destructive behaviors are typically driven by underlying anger and include actions like trying to win at all costs, displaying anger, demeaning others, and retaliating. Fear underlies many passive destructive behaviors like avoiding and giving in or yielding. When destructive behaviors are used, they can provoke the other person to respond in kind and lead to a retaliatory spiral. It is very important to keep the use of these behaviors to a minimum, and the best way to do this is to substitute constructive behaviors for destructive ones.

Constructive behaviors can also be viewed as active—involving overt behaviors—or passive—either withholding an action or choosing to do something internally. Active behaviors, such as those mentioned earlier—reaching out, perspective taking, listening for understanding, expressing emotions, and creating solutions—tend to be highly correlated with leadership effectiveness. Passive behaviors include actions reflecting on the pros and cons of different solutions, delaying responses when emotionally upset, and remaining flexible and adaptive to make the best out of a resolution.

People generally admit that they talk less when conflict occurs, and that this complicates efforts to find solutions. Reaching out to other people can feel risky because they could easily respond with denials and finger pointing. Yet, leaders know that resolving conflict is worth the risk of a rebuff because unaddressed problems tend to fester and become more difficult over time.

Managing conflict involves both talking and listening to others. Of the two functions, listening is often the more important and, for most people, more difficult. Trying to understand another person takes effort and can be challenging, especially when you feel you are right and the other person is wrong. As a result, two actions, perspective taking and
listening for understanding, become critical conflict-resolution skills. Perspective taking involves trying to imagine what the other person is thinking and feeling about a situation. Putting yourself into another person’s shoes can lead to new understanding. When this is coupled with listening to the other person, it can also help lessen tensions. When you are able to demonstrate to the other person that you have actually understood his or her point, the other person’s anger may be defused even if you both still disagree. These behaviors have made a difference in many real-life situations, such as the following two.

A manager was walking the shop floor at a utility company and saw a safety problem caused by the positioning of some equipment. He was about to castigate an employee for carelessness. The manager, who had a reputation for his critical outbursts, had recently taken a conflict-management course that talked about perspective-taking. He stopped for a moment and decided to ask the employee to talk about what was happening with the equipment from his point of view. The employee quickly came to see the problem himself and not only rectified the problem but learned an important safety lesson that stayed with him. Typically, if the manager had just yelled at the employee, he would have created an atmosphere of resistance in the future.

A surgeon had recently learned the importance of perspective taking and his own need to improve his ability to do it. During a surgery, he was about to take an action when one of the attending nurses pointed out a problem. The surgeon, who would have normally snapped at the nurse for questioning him, instead stopped and asked her to tell him more about what she had seen. As a result of listening, the surgeon realized he had missed noticing something that would probably have killed the patient had he not taken time to listen more carefully to the nurse.

In addition to listening to others, it is also important to be able to share your own thoughts and feelings with another person with whom you are having a conflict. People are typically comfortable sharing their thoughts but less so sharing their emotions. Sharing emotions is also important, though, because they can have a profound effect on conflicts. If someone represses his or her emotions, an important set of information is withheld from the other person. It can also cause the build-up of tension in the person who is upset, which in turn can lead to them using destructive behaviors as the tensions mount.

Once both parties have shared their perspectives on the conflict and have talked about what they want out of it, it becomes possible to develop and vet possible solutions. It is critical that solutions address the wants of both people. One-sided outcomes are rarely sustainable and set the stage for future conflicts stoked by dissatisfaction with earlier outcomes.

**CREATING THE RIGHT CLIMATE**

When people develop individual conflict competence, it sets the stage for improving an organization’s ability to manage the inevitable conflicts that will occur. Yet, individual conflict competence needs to be matched with organizational conflict competence. This involves developing a culture that promotes the use of constructive responses to conflict. It also requires developing a culture that supports interpersonal trust, a sense of working together for the benefit of the larger
organization, and recognition of the importance of managing emotions as part of dealing with conflict.

Creating conflict-competent organizations requires support from leaders in developing norms for dealing with conflict, as well as showing the way by modeling constructive engagement and mentoring and coaching others in the use of such processes when dealing with problems. When norms are developed and kept alive by keeping them visible and reinforcing their use by all members of the organization, a point can be reached where effective conflict-management processes begin to enhance creativity, promote productivity, and improve workplace morale. Differences are valued rather than feared. Open and honest discussions are encouraged and leveraged to obtain better results. Conflict competence becomes a highly valued asset.

NOTES


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