



Session 9 Conflict as Opportunity

Purpose

Effective leaders must be able to work through conflicts without losing sight of their goals. Messages we hear growing up – “If he hits you, hit him back,” “Don’t rock the boat,” “Tit for tat,” and “Leave well enough alone” – only reinforce our tendency to either attack someone we disagree with or avoid that person altogether. Today’s complex world demands a wider range of responses and greater skills for resolving conflict. This session provides information and strategies that will help you turn conflict into opportunity.

Agenda

1. Debrief independent learning assignment
2. Understanding conflict
 - Activity: *Dollar Bill*
 - Conflict analysis
 - Sources of conflict
 - Role play: *Next Steps for REPAIR*
3. Responses to conflict
 - Activity: *Conflict-Handling Inventory*
4. Anger
 - Activity: *Learning to Control Your Anger*
5. Conflict escalation
6. Resolving conflict
 - Workbook activity: *Identifying interests*
 - Role play: *Welcome Aboard*
7. Activity: *Conflict as Opportunity*
8. Independent learning assignment
9. Participants’ evaluations

Turbulence is life force.

It is opportunity.

*Let’s love turbulence and
use it for change.*

— Ramsey Clark,

*Secretary of State under
President Lyndon Johnson)*

Learning objectives

- Learn to view conflict as a “problem to be solved,” not a “battle to be won.”
- Apply analysis and understanding to conflict situations.
- Recognize different responses to conflict and know which response is most helpful in any given situation.
- Become aware of how to manage anger.
- Understand why conflict escalates.
- Use a step-by-step process to resolve conflict.



1. Debrief independent learning assignment.

2. Understanding conflict

Activity: Dollar Bill

Workbook activity: Conflict analysis

When I think of conflict, the first thing that comes to mind is ...

How would you define a conflict?

What is your first response when you are involved in conflict?

Conflict analysis

Understanding a conflict is the first step toward resolving it. One way to understand or analyze what's happening is to break down the conflict into its basic elements. In any conflict, consider these three elements:

1. **People.** There are two or more people or groups of people involved.
2. **Problem.** Those people are in opposition about something – that “something” is the *source* of the conflict and can be thought of as the “problem.”
3. **Process.** The behavior of the people involved, or the way they are responding to each other, is the third element. Typically, to resolve a conflict, the interaction between the people has to change before they can focus on solving the actual problem.

Sources of conflict

Conflict arises over just about anything. Typically, though, people experience conflict in five general areas. Keep in mind that frequently conflict involves more than just one or two of these sources.

- Information
- Relationships
- Resources
- Rights and responsibilities
- Values

Information. Frequently conflict starts because people have different information, lack access to information, or interpret information differently.

Example: A special meeting was called between board meetings to discuss the executive director's intention to quit the position. One of the board members did not receive notice of the special meeting but had heard that the executive director was leaving. Thinking that the executive director could be persuaded to stay, the board member who did not attend the special meeting called the executive director and asked him to reconsider. Meanwhile, at the special meeting, information documented that the executive director had not been meeting performance expectations. Without that information, and thinking the criticism about the executive director was exaggerated, the board member who did not attend the special meeting continued to support the executive director.

Relationships. Sometimes people just don't get along. “Sophia and Jarrel are like oil and water – their personalities clash.” As many times as you might have heard this about two people, relationship conflicts frequently are more about power and control than clashing personalities. Underneath the sparring, Sophia and Jarrel most likely are attempting to call the shots, have things done their own way. Each wants recognition from others for having the better answer or more effective approach.

Resources. Resources can refer to anything anyone wants – money obviously, anything money can buy, and what money can't buy – such as affection or respect. Time is a valuable resource. Power is a resource.



Example: Mayberry Community Foundation offered a grant of \$100,000 to establish an after-school program for middle school youths. Fresh Start, a youth program, applied for and received the grant. Implementation depended on partnering with the school district, yet the budget did not include compensation to the school for use of space, equipment and personnel time. School staff members refused to cooperate with Fresh Start.

Rights and responsibilities. People bring with them expectations about what they have a right to and for what they are and are not responsible. Conflicts in the boardroom or at work frequently start because people are unclear about their role or job duties, and where their responsibility stops and someone else's starts. This type of confusion also is typical when volunteers are involved.

Example: Two parents volunteered to help out at the elementary school. One mother was assigned lunchroom duty. The other mother was assigned to read to children during free time. The classroom teacher assumed the mothers would work together on class parties and field trips but never made that clear to them, so there were no snacks at the May Day party. Each mother blamed the other for not bringing snacks. Furthermore, the mother responsible for supervising the lunchroom would have preferred reading to the children and thought that maybe she wasn't considered "good enough" for that assignment. The volunteers were not given clear instructions or consulted about their assignments. As in this case, when there is a problem, even when no one did anything "wrong," we like to blame the other person.

Values. Values are what we hold near and dear. We start learning values – the principles that guide our decisions – from the time we are very young. By the time we are adults, those values are well established and probably won't change overnight, if at all. For this reason, value conflicts are the most difficult of all to resolve. Instead of looking for agreement, with value conflicts, we "agree to disagree" or we find some other way to co-exist without constant friction. Example: The pro-life and pro-choice debate is over values and the two sides will never succeed in persuading the other about which is "right" or "wrong." The two sides did find agreement over "fair fight rules" such as not using violence as a way of protest. As a society, we did agree to follow the Supreme Court's decision that women having abortions were not subject to criminal prosecution.

Belief in different religions could become a value conflict if we were to try to suppress different denominations or force one religion on everyone.

Activity: Underlying values

Think about these statements. They express values. Identify the underlying values and ask yourself, "If one person believes this and the other doesn't, can that difference or conflict be resolved?" Probably not.

I am my brother's keeper.

There is no free lunch.

Education is the key to a successful life.

Finders keepers, losers weepers.

Jesus is Lord.

The person with the most toys at the end of life wins the game.

It's not about winning, it's about how you play the game.

Live free or die.

Life is sacred.

Government should not interfere with a person's privacy.

Men are better than women.

All people are created equal.



Workbook activity: Sources of conflict

Think of conflicts you have experienced. What are their sources, or what is at the heart of these conflicts? Have you experienced situations that illustrate the five sources of conflict identified on the previous page? Briefly describe your experiences.

Conflict over information

Conflict over the relationship

Conflict about resources

Conflict about rights and responsibilities

Conflict over values



Role play: Next Steps for REPAIR

Conflicts in community organizations and in boardrooms frequently arise over goals and action plans. Read the scenario *Next Steps for REPAIR*. Find someone to role play this scenario. One person takes the role of James, the other Leticia. See if you can resolve this conflict.

James is the president of REPAIR (Racial Equality Plays An Important Role), a community organization created to promote racial harmony. REPAIR was very active during its first year. Members met monthly and sponsored two diversity workshops and a parade. After a year, however, attendance dwindled. Leticia, one of the members, wants to call everyone together and set goals for next year. James is reluctant to convene a meeting because his experience has taught him that people either don't come to meetings, or if they do, they don't volunteer to help out with follow-up tasks. He is more interested in holding another event that would highlight racial injustice. James believes that if people only knew some of the facts about inequality, they would be more motivated to help out. Leticia refuses to help with the event until the members create a strategic plan that identifies REPAIR's mission and goals. James thinks that would be a big waste of time, and wants to get on with the event.



3. Responses to conflict

Each of us has a preferred style of handling conflict. Find out how you respond to conflict by filling out the *Conflict-Handling Inventory*.

Conflict-Handling Inventory

How do you usually handle conflict? Read each statement. If you use the approach described by the statement *often*, mark a "3" next to the statement. If you use the approach *sometimes*, mark "2" next to it. If you *rarely* use the approach, mark the statement with a "1."

- 1. Plan and follow a strategy to win.
- 2. Consider the other person's point of view.
- 3. Look for a 50-50 deal.
- 4. Say what you want once and then back off.
- 5. Try to steer clear of the other person.
- 6. Never lose sight of your goal.
- 7. Investigate the problem from many angles.
- 8. Consider giving up a significant part of what you wanted.
- 9. Give in to get the fight behind you.
- 10. Change the subject when an argument starts.
- 11. Complain and be persistent in asserting your concerns.
- 12. Try to get everyone's real issues out in the open.
- 13. Give a little and encourage the other person to do the same.
- 14. Make agreements quickly and move on.
- 15. Don't make a big deal about it, unless it is really important.
- 16. Tell people the negative consequences if they don't cooperate.

- ___ 17. Present different ideas about what to do.
- ___ 18. Go with whatever seems fair.
- ___ 19. Let the other person come up with a solution.
- ___ 20. Make plans never to get in the same situation again.

To get a number score, add up the numbers 1, 2 and 3 **down** each column.

- | | | | | |
|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| 1. _____ | 2. _____ | 3. _____ | 4. _____ | 5. _____ |
| 6. _____ | 7. _____ | 8. _____ | 9. _____ | 10. _____ |
| 11. _____ | 12. _____ | 13. _____ | 14. _____ | 15. _____ |
| 16. _____ | 17. _____ | 18. _____ | 19. _____ | 20. _____ |
| _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |

Conflict-handling styles

Though we may adapt our behavior to a given situation, conflict-handling styles reflect the extent to which we try to satisfy our own concerns (assertiveness) and the extent to which we attempt to satisfy concerns of others (cooperation). Researchers have identified five styles for responding to conflict. Each can be useful depending on the situation and the skill with which the styles are used. What we tend to do is rely on our preferred style (a propensity we were born with, or learned growing up) instead of using the response that is most appropriate for a given situation.

Dominating – Someone using a dominating style will address his or her own needs and have less concern about others achieving their goals.
(*Might makes right.*)

<u>On the positive side...</u>	<u>On the negative side...</u>
Get the job done	Alienate others
Make difficult decisions	Encourage sabotage
Perceived as a leader	Focus on using power

Avoiding – A person who uses avoidance is sidestepping or ignoring an issue so that he or she doesn't have to deal with it. (*Don't make mountains out of molehills.*)

<u>On the positive side...</u>	<u>On the negative side...</u>
Conflict may go away on its own	Situation might get worse
It's not your battle, so why get involved?	Lose your influence
No chance for succeeding	Looks like you don't care

(continued on next page)

Accommodating – Accommodation is the style used by someone who neglects his or her own concerns to satisfy the needs of someone else.

(Turn the other cheek.)

On the positive side...

Preserves harmony
Makes other people happy
Demonstrates reasonableness

On the negative side...

May cause discipline problems
Reduces capacity to influence
May finally overreact

Compromising – Someone who relies on compromise as a conflict resolution style is willing to make trade-offs; in other words, give only when he or she will receive a benefit in return. *(Split the difference.)*

On the positive side...

Saves time

Focus on fairness
Temporary solution

On the negative side...

Lost opportunity for win/win solution
You feel “compromised”

Collaborating – Collaboration is the style used to describe an effort to find solutions so that all parties to a conflict have their needs met or goals satisfied. *(Two heads are better than one.)*

On the positive side...

Issues are too important to compromise
Others will be committed to solution
Enhanced and more satisfactory solution

On the negative side...

Requires trust
Requires time

4. Anger

Anger, like conflict, is normal. But, also like conflict, it becomes a destructive force if not handled appropriately. A common cause of anger is when expectations are not met. Something happens you didn't think should happen. Or something didn't happen that you thought should. We feel safe and secure when we know what will happen, when things are predictable. When things aren't predictable, we don't know what's going to happen next. That feeling of unpredictability makes most people upset or afraid. Not knowing what is going to happen threatens our sense of security, and anger is a natural response to fear.

Workbook activity: Learning to Control Your Anger

What makes me really angry is _____

Two things I can do to manage that anger are

1. _____

2. _____



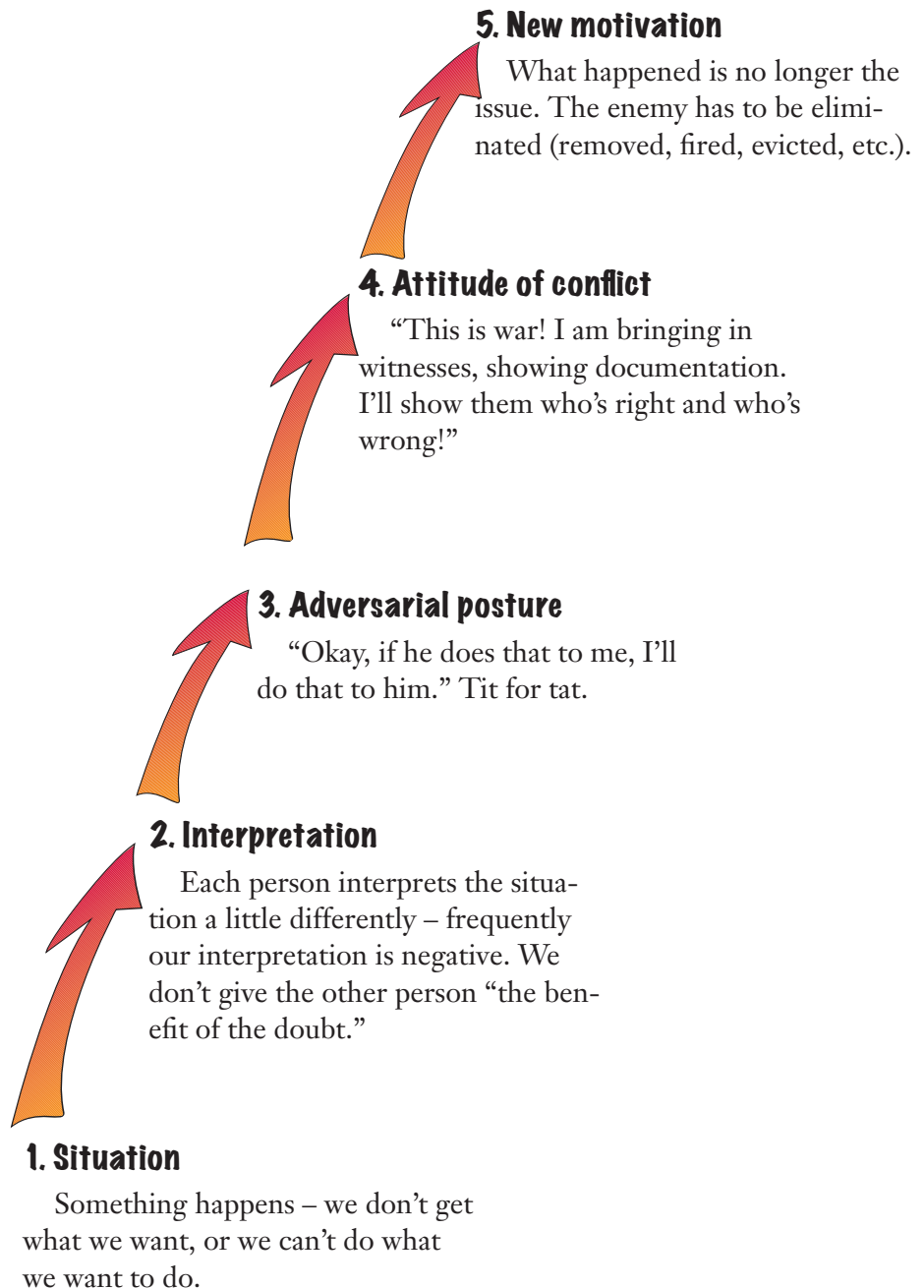
5. Conflict escalation

What happens when conflict is not handled in an effective way? Generally, it escalates. If we don't use conflict as an opportunity to solve problems and reach agreement, it becomes destructive. We lose out on finding a good solution, trust is broken and relationships are ruined.



*Conflict is a problem
to be solved,
not a battle to be won.*
— Tom Crum, author of
The Magic of Conflict

Conflict escalation



6. Resolving conflict

When conflict comes up and there are signs of escalation, what can we do? Do we get sucked into treating the conflict as a battle to be won? Or can we change the approach to “conflict is a problem in search of a solution?” Ask yourself, “How can I turn a potentially destructive situation into an opportunity for improvement?” Even though “it takes two to tango,” it takes only one person to shift the process of conflict (and the negative way people are interacting with each other) to a more constructive approach of problem solving. *You* can make the initial gesture that helps people attack the problem instead of each other.

Set the stage for problem solving: Negotiate to negotiate. *You* might be ready to switch from conflict to problem solving, but the other people involved still think, “This is a conflict.” Before you can even start to solve the problem, the first order of business is to *negotiate to negotiate*, as follows:

- Approach the other person to suggest looking for a mutually acceptable solution. Take a positive and cooperative attitude.
- Communicate in a way that shows respect and willingness to work *together* on a solution. *Listen* to them.
- Ask to set aside sufficient time to deal with the issue.

Once the other people involved agree to meet to work out a solution, try to follow this step-by-step process in that meeting. Use it as you would a meeting agenda.

Step-by-step process for resolving conflict

1. Identify the problem. Make sure everyone agrees to the definition of the conflict before you begin exploring possible solutions.
2. Gather information that is relevant to this problem. Information includes people’s interests and concerns, their feelings and emotions, as well as facts and technical data. (See the following workbook activity *Identifying interests*.)
3. Suggest alternative ways the problem could be corrected – what could we do to improve the situation?
4. After proposing a number of different alternatives, consider each one by looking at both positive aspects of the proposed solution as well as the negative aspects. Think about how the different solutions would work out. “What are the consequences if we do this? How does it help? How can it hurt?”
5. Based on this evaluation process, select the best solution. Sometimes the solution is a combination of the alternative proposals.
6. Make sure to also discuss how you will implement or carry out the solution. You most likely will need to agree on these implementation steps.
7. Check back to see how well the solution is working. Adjust if necessary.



*Negotiate interests,
not positions.*
— Roger Fisher and
William Ury in
Getting to Yes





Workbook activity: Identifying interests

Practice identifying interests underlying these positional statements or demands. Interests are the reason behind making a demand. Interests reflect your goal. Positions reflect only one solution. Looking at goals before solutions opens up other possibilities. There may be acceptable solutions that haven't been considered yet. Always make an effort to understand what the person's interests are.

Here are some examples of positions. Think about what interests underlie the statement.

1. A board member announces to the president of the board, "These meetings go on too long. You'd better start and end them on time!"

The board member's interests are _____

The board president's interests are _____

2. Parent says to son when he comes home at 11:00 p.m., "Your curfew is 10:00 p.m. You are grounded."

The parent's interests are _____

The son's interests are _____

3. Supervisor says to employee after being late twice in a row, "If you are late one more time, you are fired."

The supervisor's interests are _____

The employee's interests are _____

4. One neighbor says to another, "Stop parking in front of my house. You can park your car in front of your own house."

The first neighbor's interests are _____

The second neighbor, whose parking is at issue, has the following interests:

Role play: Welcome Aboard

Background information

Jamani is a new board member. His name, however, was left off the roster of board members. Jamani complained to the secretary about being left off the board member list and about not receiving notice and an agenda for the upcoming board meeting. Nokie is the newly elected president of the board. The secretary complained to Nokie that the board members were coming to her and asking her to do special favors for them. Nokie knew that was a problem in the past and wanted to make sure it didn't happen under her leadership.





7, Workbook activity: Conflict as Opportunity

机 危

Opportunity (Wei)

Danger (Ji)

The Chinese write the word “conflict” by using two characters – opportunity and danger. In what way does conflict present danger?

In what way does conflict present opportunity?



*The best way to eliminate
your enemy is to make him
your friend.*

*— Mohandas Gandhi,
leader of nonviolent
grassroots protests against
British rule of India*

8. Independent learning assignment

If there is an appropriate opportunity, practice using a problem-solving process when conflict occurs. Could you and the other person agree on the problem solution?

Alternative assignment in case there isn't any conflict in your life: When something makes you angry, use one of the techniques we discussed in class to prevent yourself from expressing the anger in a destructive way. Reflect on the effectiveness of what you did.

9. Participants' evaluations