

# Conflicts in Teams



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# Conflict in Teams

Teams need to understand the causes of conflict, and how it develops.

Teams are diverse. The team members have different knowledge, ideas, perspectives, working power, etc. This is an advantage in work.

Unfortunately, diversity is also a source of conflict. Conflict is inevitable and we must learn how to manage it.

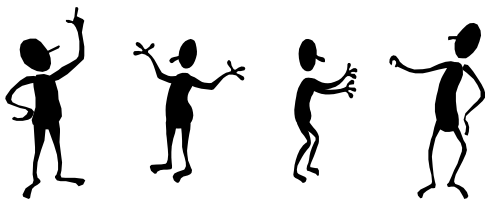
A well managed conflict is one that does not become a destructive, vicious circle. Conflict can even be positive for team work creativity, but a negative conflict can make effective team work impossible.



# Positive and Negative Conflict

**Positive conflict** can be creative. It can help the teams make better decision by:

- Motivating them to examine a problem they would have overlooked;
- Forcing them to re-examine a solution and be more innovative;
- Encouraging them to integrate several ideas to produce better solutions;
- Increasing their interest and energy, thus reinforcing solidarity and cohesiveness.



**Negative conflict** reduces team efficiency by:

- Creating an environment of fear, frustration, distrust and avoidance
- Leading to crucial information being withheld and to work patterns being disrupted
- Diverting the team's energy towards destructive ends
- Undermining their credibility in the eyes of outsiders / clients.



# Causes of Conflict in Teams

Conflicts are almost always about the different interests of team members. These differences may be real or only perceived. Reasons why this happens include:

- **Roles and responsibilities** are not clear.
- There are **communication problems**.
- **Reward and incentives** systems lead to different (open or hidden) objectives.
- There is competition over scarce **resources**.
- There are differences in **perceptions, work styles, attitudes**.
- There is **tension between equity and equality**: should team members be rewarded according to their contribution or should they all get the same?
- **Cultural differences**, which affect discussion styles and tolerance for heated debate, the fear of loss of face, the way of resolving a conflict.

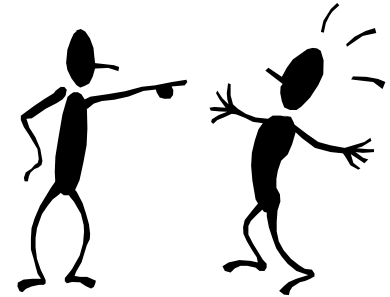


# Stages in Conflict

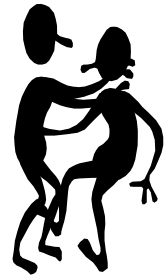
**Nervousness** : Debate begins to get heated and opponents take different positions.



**Neurosis** : Views become fixed, opponents become the 'enemy'. To 'give in' at this stage means loss of face. Threats are made.



**Combat** : Enemies become faceless, threats are often carried out, coalitions form, fighting may become physical.

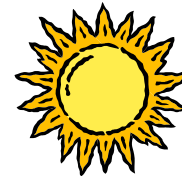


*Fuente : Oomkes and Thomas (1992)*

# Managing Conflict Quickly

Conflict must be dealt with **quickly and openly**

- Openness is important. It will prevent suspicion about the reasons behind private talks;
- Dealing with conflict early reveals misunderstandings and prevents emotions from taking over;
- Conflict left to escalate into warfare becomes much more difficult to solve;
- Solving conflict early creates greater awareness of possible future misunderstandings, forcing team members to adjust.



# Abilities to Handle Conflict

To handle conflict, try to:

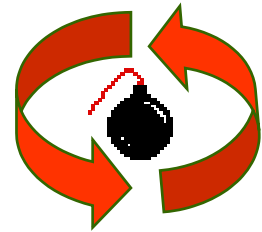
- **Be impartial**, try not to let your own perception and values influence the discussion.
- **Assure** everyone that they will have the chance to express their concerns. Keep the discussion on track.
- **Empathize with all parties.** Look at things from all angles, distinguish emotional issues from substantive issues.
- **Clarify** the issues. Rephrase and sum up the discussion in unemotional language that helps others understand the different points of view, and verify that everyone understands these. Keep communications simple and unemotional.
- **Listen**, read body language, be sensitive to feelings and be alert to emotional factors that are not immediately explicit.
- **Look for common ground**, beyond the immediate concerns, to identify shared goals and the potential for collaboration
- **Break the problem** into manageable chunks, and resolve them one by one. Start with the simpler points.
- **Maintain a sense of humour** and try to defuse the tension.



# The Vicious Circle of Conflict

## A vicious circle is created if:

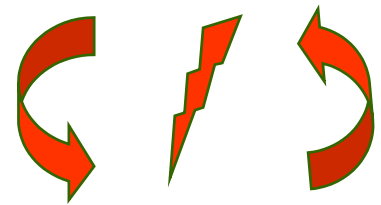
- you focus on defending your position.
- you focus on rejecting the opponent's position.



If both parties lock themselves into this behaviour, a cycle of **action and reaction, attack and defence** will follow and the conflict will not be resolved.

## A vicious circle can be broken if:

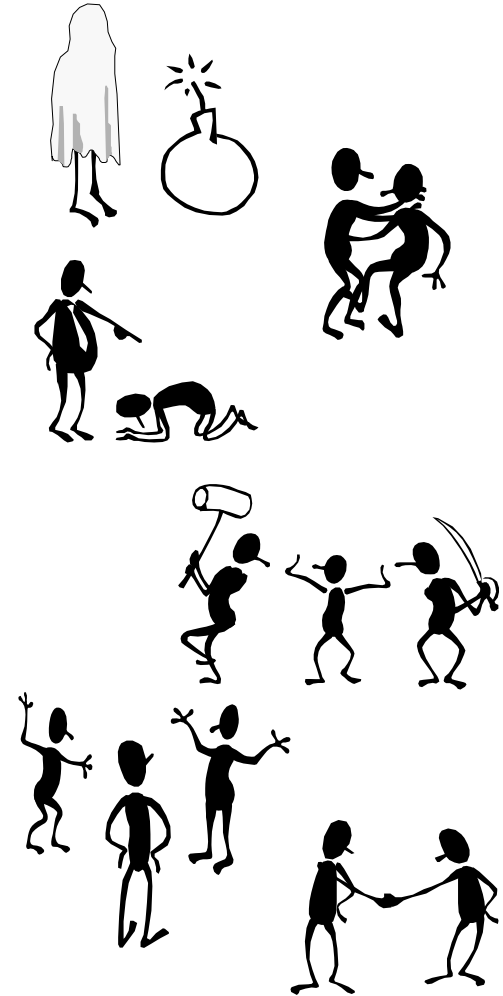
- You ask questions rather than make statements. A question should produce an answer and perhaps a solutions;
- You listen to what your opponent has to say. See it as one option to be examined in the light of your common problem;
- You keep calm and patient. Try not to counter-attack. Take time to think before you reply and allow the others time as well.



# Ways of dealing with Conflict

There are various ways of dealing with conflict, including:

- **Ignoring** the conflict and living with the consequences;
- Going into **confrontation** and fighting;
- **Giving in**, freely or under pressure;
- **Negotiating**: this is the best method when both parties stand to gain something, when they both have some power and when they are interdependent;
- Calling in respected intermediaries as **mediators**
- Referring to **arbitration**: this disempowers the team and may weaken it ; always try to solve the conflict within the team first;



# Negotiation

## What is negotiation?

- Negotiation is a process through which two or more parties try to reduce or remove a conflict between them.
- The aim is to reach a compromise through communication, persuasion and mutual concessions. Participants must be prepared to relinquish some of their power, to make a solution possible



## When to negotiate?

- When achieving your goals often depend on cooperation with others (if not, negotiation is not appropriate)
- When the goals of the different parties are not necessarily mutually exclusive : if one wins, the other does not have to lose.
- When you are likely to need the other parties in the future and you do not wish to lose a positive relationship between the different parties.

# Mediation

## What is mediation?

- Mediation is a process by which the conflicting sides call on a third party to help them resolve their conflict. However, it is not the same as arbitration.
- Mediation can only occur if both parties are willing to find a solution and if the mediator is respected by both of them.
- The role of the mediator is then to make them aware of their shared interests. The conflicting parties keep control of the decision making process.

## When to use mediation?

- When a full conflict is not wanted by either party
- When negotiation has failed and the parties don't want formal arbitration



# Arbitration

## What is arbitration?

- Arbitration is done by an outside authority figure. They are called in to decide how the conflict is to be solved.
- This is usually based on facts and the conflicting parties' rights. It is a formal process.
- The conflicting parties relinquish all control on the decision making process.



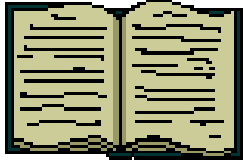
## When to resort to arbitration?

- When some of the conflicting parties feel they stand to gain because of their rights concerning the issue ;
- When other methods have failed.

However, arbitration by outsiders has **disadvantages**:

- Time may be wasted waiting for a suitable arbitrator to become available
- Someone from outside the team will only be concerned with the facts. They are not likely to know the deeper emotional factors.
- Communication can become strained within the team. Members could take 'sides' which makes agreement difficult to reach.

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