

Constructive Management of Conflict in Groups

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This article presents concepts and suggestions for managing conflict in groups, particularly emphasizing ways to increase the alternatives and flexibility of responses in conflict situations.

Conflict is inevitable in groups, and its management (and mismanagement) has strong effects on group dynamics. Therefore, it is critically important for specialists in group work to understand conflict and how to manage it constructively.

This article provides a concise overview of important conflict management concepts and strategies for those working in group settings. Presented first is a brief conceptual basis for understanding conflict and group members' behavior when in conflict, followed by specific recommendations for managing and making use of conflict in groups.

WAYS OF THINKING ABOUT CONFLICT

There are many varied definitions of *conflict* in the literature. One colloquial definition is that conflict occurs when two people try to occupy the same "space" at the same time. This *space* could range from

the simple case of a physical space, such as the last open seat on a crowded bus, to psychological space, in which each party believes that there are incompatibilities in what the various parties want. For example, conflict may emerge when two members of a group want to be the most powerful member. A good definition is offered by Thomas (1976): "conflict is the process which begins when one party perceives that the other has frustrated, or is about to frustrate, some concern of his [sic]" (p. 891). This definition deals with the type of conflict that occurs between individuals and in groups.

Conflicts often evoke strong feelings. Typical reactions are that conflict is something to be avoided, that conflict needs to be settled as rapidly as possible, and that participants in a conflict situation are likely to leave with negative feelings. Even among professionals who deal with various aspects of human behavior, a negative view of conflict predominated until relatively recently (Kelly, 1970). There now is emerging a more balanced view of conflict; it is seen as having the potential of either positive or negative effects, or both, depending on how it is managed.

Properly managed, conflict can be associated with a range of positive effects. It can cause problems to surface and be dealt with in a group, clarify varying points of

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view, stimulate and energize individuals, motivate the search for creative alternatives, provide vivid feedback, create increased understanding of one's conflict style, test and extend the capacities of group members, and provide a mechanism for adjusting relationships in terms of current realities. There also are many possible negative results from conflict, including reduced cooperation, trust, and motivation. The goal of conflict management, then, is to increase the positive results, while reducing the negative ones.

THE CONFLICT MODEL

It is important for group specialists to be aware of important variables that may influence conflict behaviors as a basis for intervening productively in conflict situations. The following model is a slight modification of the process model of Thomas (1976, 1979). It has proven useful in practice, and it is an underlying foundation for this article.

Conflicts are considered to occur in cycles or episodes (Baxter, 1982; Pondy, 1967; Walton, 1969). Each episode is influenced by the outcomes of previous episodes and also influences future episodes. The model of a conflict episode has six components or stages.

The first stage represents each individual's *entering state*, which is determined by such variables as his or her behavioral predispositions, pressures from the social environment, conflict experiences with significant others, and previous conflict episodes with the other group members. Typically, some *stimulus* (the second component) occurs that initiates or catalyzes an episode, although it need not be an explicit event.

The entering state and stimulus lead to *frustration* (the third stage of the model). Frustration may result from a wide variety of stimuli—for example, active interference with one group member's actions by another, competition for recognition, the

breaking of an agreement, or the giving of an overt or imagined insult.

The fourth step (*conceptualization*) is vitally important. The conceptualization of the situation by each group member forms the basis for his or her reactions to the frustration and subsequent behavior. This step in the episode could be roughly thought of as each party answering and reacting to the imagined answers to such questions as: What's going on here? Is it good or bad for me? Why is this other person doing this to me? An example of a conceptualization is: "You just can't trust that (type of) person." A dispute between a group member and the leader might be conceptualized by the leader as "this guy is acting out his counterdependent position and trying to take over the group" and by the member as "I must push this issue for the sake of the group because nobody else has the guts to stand up to this arrogant show-off."

Each party in a conflict develops his or her own implicit conceptualization of the situation. Each conceptualization is usually very different from that of the other person in the conflict and is unknown or not understood by the other; it may be unclear even to the person who has the conceptualization. The ways each party conceptualizes the problems and episode have a great deal of influence over the chances for a constructive outcome, the behaviors that will result, and the kinds of feelings that will be created during the conflict episode. Therefore, it is important that the conceptualizations of an event be explored in the group.

The fifth step in the conflict model is *behavior and interaction* (i.e., a sequence of behaviors between the two parties). The initial behavior is determined heavily by the conceptualization. The behaviors of each party have an effect on the subsequent behavior of the other. This interaction tends to increase or decrease the level of conflict.

The sixth and final step in the conflict episode model is the *outcome* or result of

the conflict episode. The outcome refers to the state of affairs that exists at the end of the episode, including decisions, actions taken, agreements made, and feelings of the participants.

Subsequent episodes may happen, with similar or different issues. The process described above is repeated for each episode, with the outcome of previous episodes affecting the entering state of each party in subsequent episodes.

CONFLICT RESPONSE MODES

The behavior of the participants is one of the steps or events in the conflict model described in the preceding section. A key determinant of behavior is the primary orientation (mode of dealing with conflicts) of each group member. A useful model of conflict response modes is given by Thomas and Kilmann (1974) and Thomas (1976, 1979).

Thomas and Kilmann (1974) categorized a person's orientation in two dimensions: the person's emphasis on satisfying his or her own concerns and the emphasis on satisfying the concerns of the other. This scheme can be used to describe ways that group members and leaders behave in response to conflict, thus providing a helpful tool for group facilitators and members. Thomas and Kilmann (1974) defined five dominant orientations or modes of dealing with conflicts (competing, accommodating, collaborating, sharing, and avoiding), as depicted in Figure 1.

Similar models of response to conflict have been given by Blake and Mouton (1964), Lawrence and Lorsch (1967), and Hall (1969). Recent research and thinking about such five-mode conflict response models have been provided by Cosier and Ruble (1981), Jones and Melcher (1982), Lippitt (1982), Musser (1982), Shockley-Zalabak (1981), and Thomas and Kilmann (1978).

The *competing* orientation or response mode of Thomas and Kilmann (1974) in-

volves an emphasis on winning one's own concerns at the expense of another—to be highly assertive and uncooperative. This is a power-oriented mode, with efforts to force and dominate the other, typically in a “win-lose” fashion.

Accommodating is both unassertive and cooperative, concentrating on appeasement and trying to satisfy the other's concerns without attention to one's own concerns. There is a note of self-sacrifice in this mode, with selfless generosity, yielding to the other, and acquiescing.

Collaborating is a mode with great emphasis on satisfying the concerns of all parties—to work with the other party cooperatively to find an alternative that integrates and fully satisfies the concerns of all. This mode is both assertive and cooperative. It also requires a relatively large immediate investment in time and energy to do such joint problem solving.

Avoiding reflects inattention to the concerns of either party—a neglect, withdrawal, indifference, denial, or apathy. It is neither assertive nor cooperative.

The remaining orientation, *sharing* (bargaining or compromising), is intermediate in both assertiveness and cooperativeness. It reflects a preference for partial satisfaction of the concerns of both parties. It might mean trading concessions, splitting the difference, or finding a satisfactory middle ground.

Each of us tends to be better at and more comfortable with certain types of behavior in conflict situations. This does not mean that we always respond in the same way. In terms of the five modes just described, however, most individuals tend to make predominant use of one or a few of the modes, while making relatively less use of the remainder. Each of the modes has value; none is intended to be good, bad, or preferable in all situations. One worthwhile goal for group members is to increase their repertoire of responses to conflict, with the flexibility to use various modes in different situations and in appropriate ways. Both Musser (1982) and

Shockley-Zalabak (1981) supported this contingency view.

In a group, it is of value to help participants become aware of and provide feedback to each other about their responses to conflict. Because a group can be viewed as a microcosm of larger settings, the learnings can be transferred to situations outside the group. It also is important to help group members realize that all the response modes have value.

MANAGING CONFLICT IN GROUPS

Recommendations for Facilitators

The following recommendations are made without drawing any distinctions among different types of group settings or various labels for formal groups (e.g., encounter groups, *t* groups, sensitivity training groups, laboratory method, etc.). This is done because the recommendations are quite independent of group style and also because group labels are used with various meanings in the literature.

Conflicts occur at various stages in a group's development and center around a variety of concerns. In early stages of a group, members begin experimenting with each other and "testing the water" by expressing negative feelings about other group members and the leader. At later stages in a group's evolution, periodic conflicts may become more intense (Cohen & Smith, 1976). These later types of conflict are what Bormann (1975) called "secondary tension areas." These occur frequently in successful groups, but with mostly positive consequences, such as clarification of goals, sharpened understanding of differences and issues, release of hostility, and help in stimulating interest (Forsyth, 1983).

There are several recommendations for group leaders. Often, one of the early efforts by a group facilitator is to help the group develop norms for dealing with con-

frontation and conflict. These norms typically include acceptance of and encouragement for conflict, as long as the difficulties are faced openly and honestly. The facilitator can both model and communicate conceptually about such norms. Also, the leader can provide reassurance and reinforcement or openness by group members, especially the participants in a conflict episode.

Second, the facilitator can help the members give and receive communicative signals that are reliable and accurate by making interventions to ensure that each party understands the other. Summarizing, clarifying, focusing questions, and cuing active listening by each party are examples of the interventions that would help this to occur.

Particularly in the earlier stages of a group's development, negative remarks often are indirect and focused away from the object (Corey, Corey, Callanan, & Russell, 1982). It is usually appropriate to encourage two changes: (a) replacing indirect confrontation with direct confrontation (e.g., replacing "people aren't being honest about what is really bothering them . . ." with "Sue, you just . . .") and (b) moving the focus to and responsibility for statements to the speaker, rather than to elsewhere in the group (e.g., "I feel . . ." rather than "You are a . . ."). When intervening to promote such changes, it usually is most productive to work primarily with the person expressing the negative feelings, although it is also appropriate to check out the reactions and feelings of the other person receiving the criticism, as well as those of other group members.

A fourth recommendation is to help the members deal with their different conceptualizations of a conflict situation and events in the group. Often, the parties will conceptualize a situation very differently, even when they have access to the same information about the situation. For example, one member may see another member's active behavior as "he's trying to take over the group," while the active

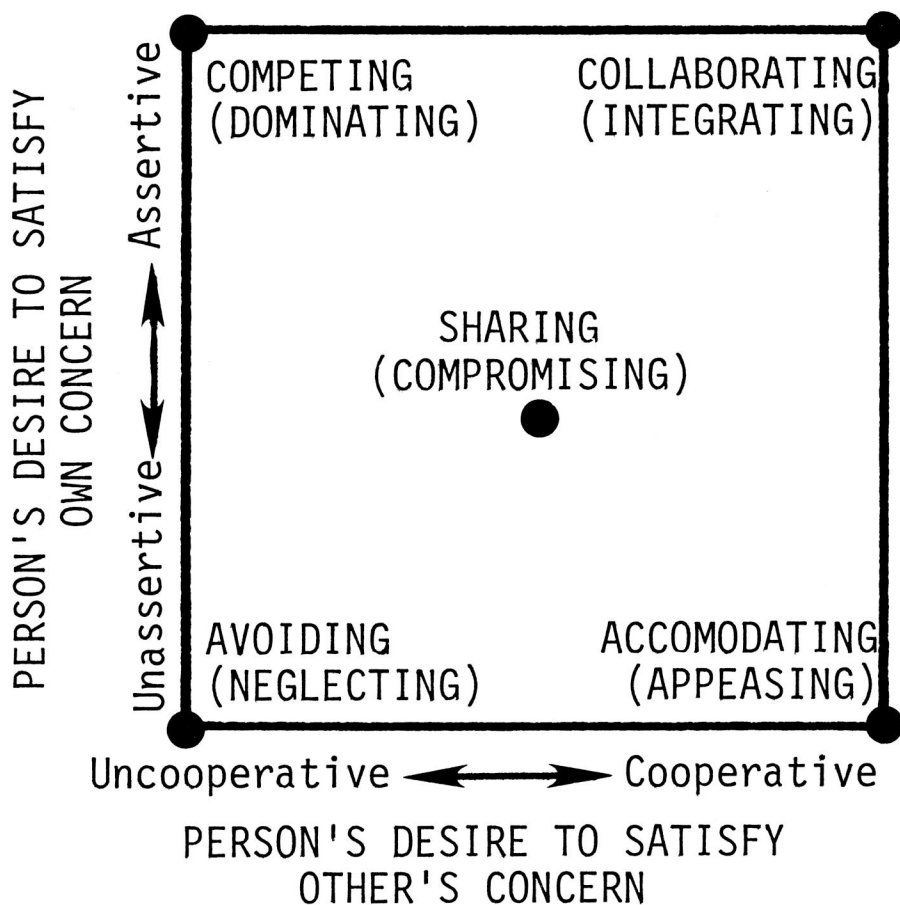


FIGURE 1
Five Conflict-Handling Modes

member may believe "I'm just trying to be helpful." Individuals have unique internal frames of reference from which they interpret events and form conceptualizations. A useful book by Culbert and McDonough (1980) that deals with this area is worth attention by those wishing to develop skills in conflict management.

An area closely related to the previous recommendation is to help the group members in conflict synchronize their efforts toward resolution of the difficulty (Walton, 1969). It is likely that the two

parties may make initiatives and be willing to deal with issues at different times; they may interpret differences in timing as rejection and indications of bad faith. An important role of the facilitator is to help the individuals synchronize the timing, focus, and extent of their overtures and responses. In general, the synchronization of timing is facilitated by helping the participants understand each other's conceptualization.

In most groups, there are some members who thrive on conflict and seem to

enjoy it. Such members present challenges for the group and its leader. Frequently, those who thrive on conflict may be trying to satisfy a drive for identity, a drive for a sense of adequacy, or a drive for power. They may "overparticipate but are not changed" (Kemp, 1970, p. 263). Others may enjoy conflict for its seeming vitality and energizing qualities for themselves. Members with either of these motivations tend to share a lack of commitment to the group and a lack of intention or effort to change. A third reason that some members overuse conflict, without constructive outcome, is that they are not adept at any other modes of behavior.

There are no quick, singular solutions for group members with these types of difficulties; however, there is another recommendation. Direct, constructive confrontation by the facilitator or other group members may be necessary to help some individuals take responsibility for themselves and make sufficient commitment to even consider change. In the case of a participant who seems to need conflict because it is energizing to him or her, the group leader might say:

After a hassle with you, I feel like I've allowed myself to be suckered into a game without an ending. It's as though you enjoy conflict for conflict's sake and don't really want to understand or deal with it.

Conflicts with the group leader also occur for some members. Especially in the early stages of a group, such conflicts are important and influential in developing the future course of the group. It is particularly important that the leader demonstrate interest in receiving and understanding negative feedback and show a willingness to learn from it, when appropriate. It also is important for the leader to avoid the trap of dropping his or her leadership responsibilities and responding to the challenge to become "just another member." Balancing these two sets of factors is complex and crucial.

A useful model for renegotiating conflicts and working through disruptions in relationships was given by Sherwood and Glidewell (1973) and Sherwood and Scherer (1975). This cyclical model offers a process for dealing with changes, "pinches" (discomforts), and disruptions in the roles of and relationship between individuals.

Casualties

There is also the specific issue of "casualties" or "injuries" in encounter groups, particularly raised by the widely publicized work of Lieberman, Yalom, and Miles (1973). Kaplan, Obert, and Van Buskirk (1980) and Bramlette and Tucker (1981) questioned the degree of hazard of casualties suggested by Lieberman et al. (1973). Each of these more recent sources reported fewer severe adverse consequences of groups than did Lieberman et al. (1973).

More important, for present purposes, are the recommendations of Kaplan et al. (1980) about ways for group leaders to safeguard against the mismanagement of conflict, which those authors regarded as the primary source of potential injury in groups. Their recommendations for managing conflict constructively to minimize the chances of casualties can be summarized in six categories:

1. screening and training of group leaders to ensure competence (especially preparing leaders to circumscribe conflicts among group members and refrain from abuses of their power as formal leaders);
2. employing regulation and quality control by peer leaders;
3. excluding from participation in groups those particularly susceptible to injury;
4. ensuring that individuals participate only after informed choice (i.e., participating after gaining a reasonable understanding of what will be occurring in the group);

5. making sure that group relationships are sufficiently developed before potent criticisms are given; and
6. providing external sources of support, especially when parties of unequal formal power are in the same group.

SUMMARY

The importance of group specialists in managing conflicts must be reemphasized. When managed effectively, conflict can lead to many positive results, and the negative effects can be minimized. There are various ways to respond to conflict, and no single type of response is best for all people and situations. Two goals for individuals in conflict are to gain greater awareness of how each tends to respond and to increase the range and flexibility of the responses to make them more appropriate and effective for each circumstance.

Many fruitful areas exist for further research and thinking. Are there differences in prevalent conflict modes in various stages of development of an ongoing group? To what extent do dominant response modes depend on the various members of a group? Assuming that group leaders also have one or a few dominant conflict response modes, how do these tendencies affect group process and the likely responses of group members to conflict? What techniques can be developed to help individuals increase their range and flexibility of responses to conflict? Attention to these and related questions is encouraged.

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