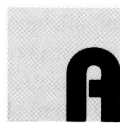# Mediating Conflict

by Rex Mitchell and Rie Rogers Mitchell

All individuals have been involved in conflict situations, as participants and in mediating conflict by trying to help others deal with such situations. Because of the pervasive nature of conflict, it is of critical importance to understand and manage it appropriately. Improving insights and skills in managing conflict can have significant benefits in personal relationships, at work, and in other organizational settings.

There are many definitions of conflict. 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 useful definition is: "conflict is the process which begins when one party perceives that the other has frustrated, or is about to frustrate, some concern of his" (p. 891).[1]

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.[2] There now is emerging a more balanced view of conflict; it is seen as having the potential of 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 faced, clarify varying points of view, stimulate and energize individuals, motivate the search for creative alternatives, test and extend the capacities of individuals, 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 is to increase the positive results, while reducing the negative ones.

This article focuses particularly on the role of a mediator, a neutral person not directly involved in the conflict, who helps the parties manage the conflict. The mediator does not determine the outcome of the conflict, but facilitates dialogue and interaction between the parties so that positive outcomes will result, while managing the potentially negative outcomes. The mediator role may be formal or very informal, but the mediator needs to gain acceptance by the parties to be effective. Often, by the time that a mediator becomes involved, a conflict has escalated to the extent that the situation is highly emotional, and it may be necessary to help the parties deal with strong negative feelings, defensiveness, distorted perceptions, and perhaps with overt manipulations plus abusive behavior and language.

Conflict Model

In order to intervene productively in conflict situations, it is important to be aware of the variables that may influence conflict behaviors. The following model, which is a slight modification of the process model of Thomas,[1,3] has proven useful in understanding conflict. Conflicts are considered to occur in cycles or episodes.[4,5,6] 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 same individual(s). Typically, some stimulus occurs (the second stage of the model) that initiates or catalyzes the 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 individual's action 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 forms the basis for the individual's reactions to the frustration, and subsequent behavior. This step in the episode could be thought of as each person 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." Each party in a conflict situation develops his or her own implicit conceptualization of the situation. Each conceptualization is usually very different from that of the other individual 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 way each party conceptualizes the problems and episode has 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.

The fifth step in the conflict model is behavior and interaction between the parties in conflict. The initial behavior is determined heavily by an individual's conceptualization. The behavior of each person has 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 occur, with similar or different issues. The process described above is repeated for each episode, with the outcomes 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) for each individual. A useful model of conflict response modes is given by Thomas and Kilmann.[1,3,7] They categorize 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. They

define 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 others.[8,9] Recent research and thinking about such five-mode conflict response models have been provided by a number of researchers.[10,11,12,13,14,15]

The competing orientation or response mode of Thomas and Kilmann[7] involves 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.

High or Assertive	Competing (Dominating)		Collaborating (Integrating)
↕ Party's Desire to Satisfy Own Concern		Sharing (Compromising)	
Low or Unassertive	Avoiding (Neglecting)		Accommodating (Appeasing)
	Low or Uncooperative	←→	High or Cooperative

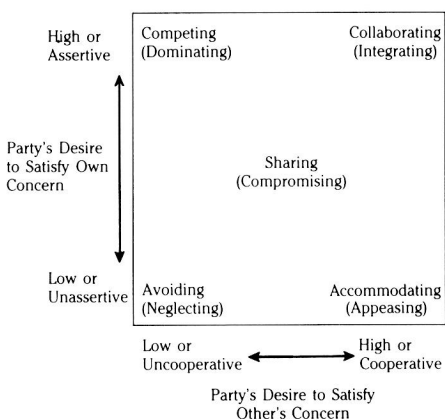Party's Desire to Satisfy Other's Concern

FIGURE 1

Five Conflict Handling Modes

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 in-

termediate 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 is to increase one's repertoire of responses to conflict, with the flexibility to use various modes in different situations and in appropriate ways.

Managing Conflicts

Actions can be taken to help manage a conflict, at each of the steps in the conflict episode model presented earlier. Interventions at the beginning of an episode (dealing with the stimulus which sets off an episode) generally take the form of reducing, controlling, or eliminating contacts between the parties. Interventions at step 4 (conceptualization) take many forms, often with a mediator to work with the individuals separately and/or together to help them understand and work with the differences in the ways they conceptualize the conflict situation. Interventions dealing with behavior (step 5) usually involve either changes in the reward systems and/or establishing limits on the tactics that the parties will use. Interventions at stage 6 (the outcome) usually involve work with the parties separately to help them learn to cope differently with consequences of the conflict in ways that reduce the negative feelings and their effects on work and relationships.

There are many useful mediation or intervention strategies. Often, more than one may be used in sequence. The following model is offered as an aid in diagnosing a conflict and choosing strategies to deal with it. Two important factors are considered in choosing an intervention: the nature of the differences between the parties, and the mixture of substantive and emotional components in the conflict.

The "best" ways of managing a conflict will vary depending on the type of issue

or issues on which people disagree. Four basic kinds of issues are suggested for use in diagnosis:

- Facts.   Often conflicts occur because the individuals have different information, interpret information differently, selectively accept different information, make different assumptions, or define the problem and constraints differently.
- Methods and Roles.   Even when the parties may share the same objectives and understanding of the facts, they still may disagree on strategies, methods, and roles for accomplishing the objectives.
- Objectives.   Other conflicts occur particularly because of differences in what should be accomplished i.e., the parties have different sets of objectives and priorities.
- Values.   The parties may view the disagreement as one involving values, ethics, moral considerations, etc.

Generally, conflicts are more difficult to manage as you move down the list above, with disagreements over values most difficult to handle. Often the individuals in conflict have not thought about or are unclear about the nature of the issues(s) over which they disagree. Clarification of the nature of the differences often helps directly in mediating the conflict. In addition, some conflict mediation strategies are particularly appropriate when the conflict is about facts, other strategies are more appropriate when the conflict is over values, and so on.

The second factor considered in the model for choosing mediation strategies is the mixture of substantive and emotional components and aspects in the conflict situation. This factor often depends partly on how advanced the conflict is at the present time. The choice of intervention strategies is very different for a rather calm, rational conflict in which feelings are moderate and being held in check than it is for a highly emotional situation in which the conflict is open and unrestrained.

These two factors (nature of differences and mixture of substantive and emotional components) form the basis for the model shown in Figure 2. Generally, the difficulty of mediating a conflict increases as you move downward and to the right in this figure. The three diagonal slices marked A, B, and C indicate steps along this continuum of difficulty from upper left to lower right in the figure. The arbitrary division of the continuum into three diagonal slices is only for convenience in this discussion.
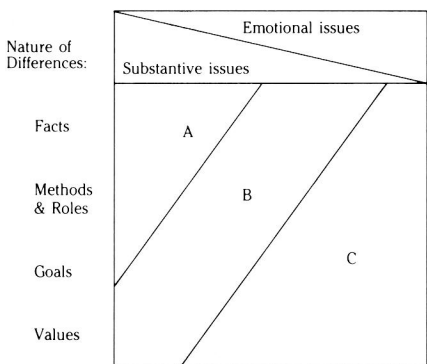
FIGURE 2

Choosing Mediation Strategies

As a first approximation, similar conflict management strategies are appropriate in each of the diagonal slices or regions. In Region A, where there is a low emotional content and the differences are primarily over facts and methods, the appropriate strategy is some form of joint problem-solving. In Region B, with a higher emotional content and/or differences dealing more with goals and values, the most appropriate conflict management strategies are usually some form of bargaining or interpersonal negotiating (not limited to formal bargaining). Conflicts in the area designated as Region C in Figure 2, with high emotional content and differences centering particularly on values, goals, and roles, call for other strategies. Here, when possible, it is usually best to do the initial work with the individuals separately. Among the appropriate strategies are helping the individuals: (a) express, clarify, and work through their feelings; (b) recognize and deal with the different conceptualizations of the conflict situation held by the parties; and (c) restructure their perceptions of the situation and the other parties in ways that improve the likelihood of constructive interactions when the individuals are together. Subsequently, the conflict situation may move into Region B or Region A, and involve additional conflict management strategies.

Often, a typical mediator (helpful third-party) role involves initial work with the parties separately, followed by one or more sessions with the parties together. A few brief suggestions follow (Walton[6] is a good source for more).

Preliminary interviewing with each party should establish some reasonable degree of desire by both parties to deal directly with the conflict and search for improvements in the present situation, and willingness to have you act in a mediator role. The individual work can also help the participants clarify their views and the

basic issues of conflict, give them an opportunity to ventilate some of their feelings in a neutral setting, and prepare them for a forthcoming joint meeting.

Work with the parties together is perhaps the most challenging stage for the mediator. The following key strategic factors are recommended to help promote a productive meeting:

- Mutual Positive Motivation. During the meeting, the mediator should help both parties be motivated to attempt to improve or deal with the conflict, and recognize such intent in the other.

- Balance in Situational Power of Parties. Wide differences in the power positions of the two parties tend to hinder productive discussion. When necessary, the mediator needs to help the parties transcend this hinderance.

- Synchronization of their Efforts. The two parties tend to make initiatives and be willing to deal with issues at different times, and to interpret differences in timing of the other as rejection and an indication of bad faith.

- Facilitate Reliable Communications. The facilitator can act to help the parties understand each other. Summarizing, clarifying, focusing questions, cueing active listening by each party, and modeling openness are examples of interventions that help this to occur.

- Each Party Putting the Other into Context. Individuals have distinctively different internal frames-of-reference from which they view and interpret events. These unique frames-of-reference are a primary basis for the different conceptualizations of a conflict situation by the parties. A potent mediation intervention is to help the parties put each other into accurate context through helping them understand each other's unique internal frame-of-reference (see[16,17] for additional discussion).

- Optimum Tension in the Situation. There should be moderate stress in the parties during most of the meeting, rather than too high or too low levels of stress.

These concepts and suggestions can be used by both mediators and the parties in a conflict to change favorably the balance of positive and negative effects of the conflict. Practice and experience are vital in improving our abilities to manage conflicts. In learning from experience, Aldous Huxley wisely remarked, "experience is not what happens to you; it is what you do with what happens to you."

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