

# Conflict resolution assignment

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How we view conflict will largely determine our attitude and approach to dealing with it. Conflict may be viewed as a feeling, a disagreement, a real or perceived incompatibility of interests, inconsistent worldviews, or a set of behaviors. If we are to be effective in handling conflict, we must start with an understanding of its nature. We need tools that help us separate out the many complex interactions that make up a conflict, that help us understand the roots of conflict, and that give us a reasonable handle on the forces that motivate the behavior of all participants, including ourselves.

Whether we are aware of them or not, we all enter conflict with certain assumptions about its nature. Sometimes these assumptions are very helpful to us, but at other times they are blinders that limit our ability to understand what lies behind a conflict and what alternatives exist for dealing with it. We need frameworks that expand our thinking, that challenge our assumptions, and that are practical and readily usable. As we develop our ability to understand conflict in a deeper and more powerful way, we enhance our ability to handle it effectively and in accordance with our deepest values about building peace.

However, in order to simplify the task of handling complex conflicts, we need to complicate our thinking about conflict itself. This is an ongoing challenge for everyone concerned with conflict and its solution. A framework for understanding conflict is an organizing lens that brings a conflict into better focus. There are many different lenses we can use to look at conflict, and each of us will find some more amenable to our own way of thinking than others. Moreover, the lenses presented in this chapter are not equally

applicable to all conflicts. Seldom would we apply all of them at the same time to the same situation.

Nevertheless, together they provide a set of concepts that can help us understand the nature of conflict and the dynamics of how conflict unfolds.

What Is Conflict? Conflict may be viewed as occurring along cognitive (perception), emotional (feeling), and behavioral (action) dimensions. This three-dimensional perspective can help us understand the complexities of conflict and why a conflict sometimes seems to proceed in contradictory directions. Conflict as Perception As a set of perceptions, conflict is a belief or understanding that one's own needs, interests, wants, or values are incompatible with someone else's.

There are both objective and subjective elements to this cognitive dimension. If I want to develop a tract of land into a shopping center, and you want to reserve it as open space, then there is an objective incompatibility in our wants. If I believe that the way you desire to guide our son's educational development is incompatible with my philosophy of parenting, then there is at least a significant subjective component. What if only one of us believes an incompatibility to exist, are we still in conflict? As a practical matter, I find it useful to think of conflict as existing if at least one person believes it to exist.

If I believe us to have incompatible interests, and act accordingly, then I am engaging you in a conflict process whether you share this perception or not. Conflict as Feeling Conflict also involves an emotional reaction to a situation or interaction that signals a disagreement of some kind. The emotions felt

might be fear, sadness, bitterness, anger, or hopelessness, or some amalgam of these. If we experience these feelings in regard to another person or situation, we feel that we are in conflict-and therefore we are.

As a mediator, I have sometimes seen people behave as if they were in great disagreement over profound issues, yet I have not been able to ascertain exactly what they disagreed about. Nonetheless, they were in conflict because they felt they were. And in conflicts, it does not take two to tango. Often a conflict exists because one person feels in conflict with another, even though those feelings are not reciprocated by or even known to the other person. The behavioral component may be minimal, but the conflict is still very real to the person experiencing the feelings.

Conflict as Action Conflict also consists of the actions that we take to express our feelings, articulate our perceptions, and get our needs met in a way that has the potential for interfering with someone else's ability to get his or her needs met. This conflict behavior may involve a direct attempt to make something happen at someone else's expense. It may be an exercise of power. It may be violent. It may be destructive. Conversely, this behavior may be conciliatory, constructive, and friendly. But, whatever its tone, the purpose of conflict behavior is either to express the conflict or to get one's needs met.

Again, the question of reciprocity exists. If you write letters to the editor, sign petitions, and consult lawyers to stop my shopping center, and do not even know you exist, are we in conflict? Can you be in conflict with me if I am not in conflict with you? Theory aside, I think the practical answer to both

of these questions is yes. Obviously, the nature of a conflict in one dimension greatly affects its nature in the other two dimensions. If I believe you are trying to hurt me in some way, am likely to feel as though I am in conflict with you, and I am also apt to engage in conflict behaviors.

Also, none of these dimensions is static. People can go rapidly in and out of conflict, and the strength or character of conflict along each dimension can change quickly and frequently. And even though each of the three dimensions affects the others, a change in the level of conflict in one dimension does not necessarily cause a similar change in the other dimensions. Sometimes an increase in one dimension is associated with a decrease in another dimension. For example, the emotional component of conflict occasionally decreases as people increase their awareness of the existence of the dispute and their understanding of its nature.

This is one reason why conflict can seem so confusing and unpredictable. What about a situation where no conflict perceptions, emotions, or behaviors are present but where a tremendous conflict potential exists? Perhaps you are unaware of my desire to build a shopping center, and I am unaware of our plans for open space. Are we in conflict? We may soon be, but until conflict exists on one of the three dimensions, I believe it is more productive to think in terms of potential conflict than actual conflict. The potential for conflict almost always exists among any individuals or institutions that interact.

Unless people want to think of themselves as constantly in conflict with everyone in their lives, it is more useful to view conflict as existing only when

it clearly manifests itself along one of the three dimensions. Can social systems-organizations, countries, and communities-as well as individuals be in conflict, particularly along the emotional or cognitive dimensions?

Although there are some significant dangers to attributing personal characteristics or motivational structures to systems, practically speaking I think systems in conflict often experience that conflict on all three dimensions.

Although we might better use terms like culture, ethos, public opinion, or popular beliefs to signify the greater complexity and different nature of these dimensions in social systems, conflict among groups clearly has cognitive and affective dimensions as well as a behavioral dimension. Is there an emotional and a perceptual aspect to the conflict between Iraq and the United States? Of course, and we cannot understand the nature of the conflict if we do not deal with these aspects. This does not mean that every individual member of each country shares the same feelings or perceptions or even that a majority do.

Instead, it means that the conflict evokes certain reactions and attitudes from the dominant leaders and a significant number of people in each society. Similarly, when we look at conflicts between union and management, environmental groups and industry associations, Democrats and Republicans, it is important to understand the attitudes, feelings, values, and beliefs that these groups have toward each other if we are to understand what is occurring. By considering conflict along the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions, we can begin to see that it does not proceed along one simple, linear path.

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When individuals or groups are in conflict, they are dealing with different and sometimes contradictory dynamics in these different dimensions, and they behave and react accordingly. This accounts for much of what appears to be irrational behavior in conflict. Consider this not unusual workplace dispute: Two employees are assigned to work together on a project and soon find themselves in a conflict over whether they are each pulling their weight and passing along important information to each other. They engage in a fairly public shouting match, and they each complain to their supervisor.

The supervisor sits them both down, and they agree on a workload division and certain behavioral standards, to which they then seem to adhere. Has the conflict been resolved? It may have been alleviated along the behavioral dimension. But each goes away from this meeting feeling victimized by the other and unappreciated by the boss. One of the employees decides that these feelings just result from the nature of the job and believes that the immediate conflict is over, but the other continues to see the conflict being acted out every time the other person comes late for a meeting or sends a terse e-mail.

Thus progress has been made in the behavioral dimension, the emotional dimension is if anything worse, and there are contradictory developments along the cognitive dimension. This kind of result is not unusual in conflict, and it drives people to behave in apparently inconsistent ways. These employees may cease their overtly conflicting behavior, but the tension between them may actually increase. What Causes Conflict? Conflict has many roots, and there are many theories that try to explain these origins.

Conflict is seen as arising from basic human instincts, from the competition for resources and power, from the structure of the societies and institutions people create, from the inevitable struggle between classes. Even though there is something to be said for most of these theories, they are not always helpful to us as we contend with conflict. What we need is a remark that helps us use some of the best insights of different conflict theories in a practical way. If we can develop a usable framework for understanding the sources of conflict, we can create a map of conflict that can guide us through the conflict process.

When we understand the different forces that motivate conflict behavior, we are better able to create a more nuanced and selective approach to handling conflict. The wheel of conflict, illustrated in Figure 1. 1, is one way of understanding the forces that are at the root of most conflicts. This conceptualization of the sources of conflict has arisen out of my work ND conversations with my colleagues at CDR Associates and is derivative of the circle of conflict developed by one of my partners, Christopher Moore (see Moore, 1986, 1996). At the center of all conflicts are human needs.

People engage in conflict either because they have needs that are met by the conflict process itself or because they have (or believe they have) needs that are inconsistent with those of others. Discuss the continuum of human needs later in this chapter. My major point for now is that people engage in conflict because of their needs, and conflict cannot be transformed or settled unless these needs are dressed in some way. Needs do not exist in a vacuum, however. They are embedded in a constellation of other forces that can generate and define conflict.

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In order to effectively address needs, it is usually necessary to work through some of these other forces, which affect how people experience their needs and how these needs have developed. There are five basic forces, or sources of conflict: the ways people communicate, emotions, values, the structures within which interactions take place, and history (see Figure 1. 1 Let's examine each of these so races further. Communication Humans are very imperfect communicators. Sometimes this imperfection generates conflict, whether or not there is a significant incompatibility Of interests, and it almost always makes conflict harder to solve.

Human communication has inspired a large literature and multiple fields of study, and I will discuss communication as a resolution tool later. The main thing to consider here is how hard it is for individuals to communicate about complex matters, particularly under emotionally difficult circumstances. We should keep reminding ourselves just how easy it is for communication to go awry. Conflict frequently escalates because people act on the assumption that they eve communicated accurately when they have not.

When they learn that others are acting on the basis of different information and assumptions, they often attribute this to bad faith or deviousness and not to the imperfections of human communication. Many factors may contribute to communication problems. Culture, gender, age, class, and environment significantly affect individuals' ability to communicate effectively. People often rely on inaccurate or incomplete perceptions, tend to form stereotypes, and carry into their communications conclusions drawn from former interactions or experiences.

They are also inclined to try to solve problems before they understand them. The greater the duress a person is under, the harder it is for him or her to communicate (and often the more important it is as well). Sometimes communication takes more energy and focus than someone is able or willing to give at a critical point, and it is easy to become discouraged or hopeless about communicating effectively in serious conflicts. Despite all these problems, people can and do muddle through when they communicate, and they can work on improving communication, even in very intense conflicts.

Communication is one of the greatest sources of both difficulty and hope in dealing with serious conflicts. Emotions are the energy that fuel conflict. If people could always stay perfectly rational and focused on how to best meet their needs and accommodate those of others, and fifthly could calmly work to establish effective communications, then many conflicts would either never arise or would quickly deescalate. But of course that is not human nature, even if many of us occasionally pretend that it is.

At times emotions seem to be in control of behavior. Sometimes they are also a source of power for disputants. They contribute to the energy, strength, courage, and perseverance that allow people to participate forcefully in conflict. Emotions are generated both by particular interactions or circumstances and by previous experiences. When someone points a finger at us in conflict, we have a reaction based on the immediate context and meaning of that behavior, but we may also be reacting to all the times in the past when that gesture has been made at us in anger.

In conflict it is often possible and necessary to work specifically on the emotional content of disputants' experience. This usually requires creating some opportunity to express and release emotions and to experience someone else's understanding and empathy. We often talk about the need to ventilate, to let an emotion out through a direct and cathartic expression of it. Often, however, ventilation is neither possible nor desirable. A direct expression of feelings may escalate a conflict.

Instead, it may be necessary for disputants to discuss feelings without demonstrating them, to work toward establishing a safe environment for the expression of emotions, to let emotions out in safe increments, or to express them to a third party rather than directly to the other person. Sometimes (although this may go against some popular beliefs of our culture), it is simply necessary to suppress feelings until a more appropriate opportunity for dealing with them presents itself. Emotions fuel conflict, but they are also a key to deescalating it. Many emotions can prevent, moderate, or control conflict.

Part of everyone's emotional makeup is the desire to seek connection, affirmation, and acceptance. A genuine expression of sadness or concern can be key to addressing conflict effectively. Another key in many conflicts is to find an adequate way of dealing with the feelings of all participants so that they are either ignored nor allowed to escalate out of control. Sometimes it may be necessary to let a conflict escalate somewhat, enough to deal with emotions but not so much as to impair people's ability to eventually deal with the situation constructively.

The art of dealing with conflict often lies in finding the narrow path between a useful expression of emotions and destructive polarization. This is one reason why it is often helpful to employ the services of a third party. Values are the beliefs we have about what is important, what distinguishes right from wrong and good from evil, and what principles should govern how we lead our lives. When a conflict is defined or experienced as an issue of values, it becomes more charged and intractable.

Because people define themselves in part by their core beliefs, when they believe these values are under attack, they feel they are being attacked. Similarly, it is hard for people to compromise when core beliefs are in play, because they feel they are compromising themselves or their integrity. Although some conflicts are inescapably about fundamental value differences, more often disputants have a choice whether they will define a conflict in this way. When individuals feel unsure of themselves, confused about what to do, or under attack, it is particularly tempting to them to define an issue as a matter of right or wrong.

This empowers and fortifies them even as it rigidifies their thinking and narrows acceptable options. Often it is easier to carry on a conflict if one can view oneself as honorable, virtuous, and the carrier of good, and opponents as evil, malicious, and dangerous. This stance, comforting though it may be, tends to escalate and perpetuate conflict. Though values are often a source of conflict and an impediment to its resolution, they can also be a source of commonality and a restraint on conflict escalation.

Usually, disputants can find some level on which they share values, and they often have values about interpersonal relations that support collaborative efforts. Recognizing when values are in play in conflict is critical to moving the conflict in a constructive direction. When individuals address values directly and express their beliefs affirmatively—that is, in terms of what they believe in rather than what they are against—they can address conflict more constructively. Structure The structure, the external framework, in which an interaction takes place or an issue develops is another source Of conflict.

The elements Of a structure may include available resources, decision-making procedures, time constraints, communication procedures, and physical settings. Even when compatible interests might move people toward a more cooperative stance, the structure in which they are working may promote conflict. An example is the litigation process, one structure for decision making when people are in conflict. Litigation is well designed for achieving a decisive outcome when other less adversarial procedures have not worked. However, it is also a structure that exacerbates conflict, makes compromise difficult, and casts issues as win-lose struggles.

Voting is another interesting example. When voting is used to resolve serious differences about an issue, the issue tends to become popularized, and constructive communication can become difficult. Often, candidates for office try to seize the center of the political spectrum on many important issues and therefore exhibit little real difference on these issues. However, they also look for so-called wedge issues that can put them into conflict with their rivals and at the same time, they hope, into favor with a large segment of voters.

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However, this can increase the conflict among the public on such issues as affirmative action, abortion, gun control, welfare, or health care. Other structural elements that often affect conflict include proximity of the disputants, distribution of resources, access to information, legal parameters, organizational structure, and political pressures. Sometimes these structural realities can be changed through a conflict resolution process. Often, however, part of what that process must accomplish is an acceptance of the structural elements that are unlikely to be altered.

History Conflict cannot be understood independently of its historical context. The history of the people who are participants in a conflict, of the systems in which the conflict is occurring, and of the issues themselves has a powerful influence on the course of the conflict. History provides the momentum for the development of conflict. Too often we try to understand a conflict in isolation from its historical roots and as a result are baffled by the stubbornness of the players. Conversely, history is not a determinant of conflict, although sometimes it can seem that way.

The long history of conflict in the Middle East, Northern Ireland, or the former Yugoslavia, for example, goes not mean that present conflicts in these regions will never be settled. That form of historical determinism is dangerous and misleading. However, such conflicts cannot be solved without an understanding of the complicated systems of interaction that have developed over time and the degree to which the conflict itself has become part of the disputants' identity. All these different sources of conflict-communication, emotions, values, structure, and history-interact with each other.

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People's history affects their values, communication style, emotional reactions, and the Structure in which they operate. And history is constantly being made and therefore affected by these other sources. The wheel of conflict is a construct, and the test of its power is how useful it is. I believe that these are the sources we need to analyze as part of comprehending conflict. To understand a conflict and to plan how to work with it, we need to think about where different people are stuck, where insights are needed, and where opportunities to improve a situation can be found.

The wheel is a mechanism that helps us to do this. The value of such an analytical tool and of an understanding of the three emissions of conflict described earlier is illustrated by the case of the ten cousins. Ten cousins who lived in different parts of the United States and Canada jointly inherited a valuable piece of oceanfront property in New England. This property had belonged to their grandfather, who had decided to leave it directly to them partly because of his distress about the poor relationships among his three children, the cousins' parents.

The property had been the site of many of the happiest moments in the cousins' childhood, but it was in disrepair, and the existing house and road probably needed to be replaced. The cousins ranged in age from advent to forty-five and had extremely different financial situations, from quite poor to very wealthy. They had widely different views about what should be done, from selling the property and dividing up the equity to preserving it as a family center. For the property to be usable, a considerable investment would have to be made, which not all the cousins were in a position to do.

Complicating the picture were the tense relations in at least two of the three sibling groups. Also, the siblings and parents in one group had been out of intact with the rest of the family for most of the past fifteen years, largely because the mother did not get along with her siblings. Not knowing how to proceed, the cousins contacted me and, together with a colleague, I met with nine of them in a retreat setting. How could we get a handle on the nature of this conflict? It was clear that all three dimensions of conflict were in play.

There were behavioral issues that needed to be attended to, entrenched perceptions about the situation and each other, and a great deal of emotionality. However, even though work had to be done on the behavioral, r action, issues, the long-term success of the cousins' co-ownership depended more on their ability to work on the attitudes and emotions about each other that had been part of their family dynamics for so long. It was not at first obvious where to focus our attentions given the complexity of this situation. Clearly, there were conflicting needs to be addressed.

Some cousins wanted to maintain this property in the family and to “ honor the grandfather's legacy and wishes. ” Others were worried about the time and resources this might demand. Most hoped to promote better family relations UT were worried that the opposite might occur. But these needs were embedded in all the elements found in the wheel Of conflict. There had been poor communication (and in some cases no communication) among the cousins for years. The property represented the complex emotions that all had about their family relations. It was a symbol of both the problems in the family and the best the family had to offer.



The cousins had different values about sharing the property, developing it, equalizing contributions, taking into account different resources, and how families ought to interact. The structural problems were enormous. The cousins had no easy way of communicating making decisions, or overseeing work on the property, and the disparity in their resources greatly complicated the picture. Furthermore, numerous local land use regulations limited their options for subdividing the property or building additional structures. Finally, history was a heavy presence.

In many ways the cousins were continuing a multimillionaire family saga. The conflicts among the parents were in danger of being replicated. There was also a positive history as well—the childhood memories that each had of their time at the property were almost all positive and were a titivation to seek a constructive resolution. Because this situation was so complex and our time to deal with it relatively limited (three days), we decided that we could not deal with issues internal to sibling groups and that the strength of the cousins was the relatively positive attitudes they were expressing across sibling groups.

We felt that the history needed to be addressed and that the major immediate focus needed to be on the structural barriers to moving forward. We therefore started by asking each cousin to share his or her memories of time spent on the property and his or her hopes and fears for its future. As an outcome of this discussion, they all decided they really wanted to keep the property if at all possible. They agreed to work on a plan for keeping the property, and they also agreed that everyone should have some access to it, regardless of his or her contribution.

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Once these general agreements were made, we then focused on the structural issues of how to communicate, make decisions, work with local authorities, and get information about different options. The cousins left with some general decisions made and an interesting communication and decommissioning structure. They set up a steering committee with one preventative from each sibling group. Our intervention thus flowed from our analysis of the structure and causes of this particular conflict.