



# When Facing Conflict, What is Your Approach?

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**C**onflict is a mental state of disagreement within or between individuals. It presents a level of instability and can pose a serious threat to personal health and social connectivity.

Conflict occurs in many circumstances, whether internal or external, but can be categorized into these general areas – occasions when: a private view and requirement for action are incongruent; personal and work goals intersect; home and family responsibilities are not shared; personal interests differ from interests of others, and; unrealistic expectations meet realistic resources.

This disharmony, and resulting mental and physiological reaction, causes discomfort and ill-ease. We tend to think and act to restore our innate preference for balance. When faced with conflict we deliberately engage in a process to find a (personally) satisfactory resolution, or to deny its importance and refuse to explore it further. One flaw to avoid in attempting to resolve conflict is the presumption that there is always a right and wrong answer.

If a conflict is transient, has potential for minimal impact or there is little difference between one value or action and the opposing one, the ensuing tension may gradually dissipate. However, if the conflict represents a substantial deviation from an individual's comfort zone, the tension may result in internalized distress or open confrontation.

The resolution process can be a basic re-interpretation of a belief or action. We can mentally go from “the irresponsible driver who dented my car door on the parking lot” to “the poor driver probably didn't realize they bumped my door! It's not that noticeable anyway.” The resolution can also be as elaborate as referring the issue for a court decision.

Unfortunately, the most common approach to conflict is to avoid confronting the source and potential resolution. Although most people do not like conflict, they like confrontation even less. The personal consequences of this approach can be devastating as resentment begins to take its toll. The absence of internal serenity, trust and harmony and

the presence of feelings of being devalued or humiliated causes mental health to suffer.

## Internal Conflict

Internal conflict occurs frequently. As we decide which route to take when travelling to work or determine whether or not to confront a partner or colleague about a perceived injustice, we mentally process the pros and cons of each choice and may finally decide by weighing the consequences of *not* making a specific choice. We put an option “on the table” because we imagine its potential for a very positive outcome and minor negative consequences.

In the best case scenario we speak to a colleague about an injustice, the flaw is recognized and acknowledged with little distress, and behaviour is changed. Nevertheless, prior to making this choice, it would be wise to also anticipate a not-so-congenial reaction to confrontation. If the colleague becomes defensive, or even offensive, the imagined outcome is no longer a realistic expectation. Unfortunately, too often individuals dwell on the negative potential, choose not to explore a modified approach, and take no action. This may result in a range of undesirable consequences, starting with resentment.

## Cognitive Dissonance

Conflict creates physiological discomfort which can lead to physical symptoms. To avoid tension, conflict is addressed and resolved through change or appropriate, genuine dismissal.

Cognitive dissonance is the mental state that exists when our beliefs, or a belief and action, are inconsistent with each other. Philosophically, intellectually, morally or spiritually we may not agree with a behaviour or we believe that it is harmful, yet we may engage in it. As EAP Coordinator, this conflict is seen in areas such as smoking, physical inactivity, extramarital relationships, and time or energy limitations.

Individuals who experience such significant emotional distress direct their response toward minimizing the psychological distress but can take an

irrational approach. The response ultimately involves changing the thinking or the behaviour.

### Changing Thoughts or Beliefs

Individuals can dismiss health hazards and justify continued smoking by using one example of a smoker who lived to age 90. The change might also occur in dismissing the emotion accompanying an affair by arguing that the legal bonds of marriage are out-dated or inconsequential. In both situations, continuing the “desired” behaviour was enabled by dismissing select emotional or intellectual information.

### Changing Behaviours

Given the same scenarios, individuals may come to different conclusions due to the introduction of new information or emotional factors. This prompts a personal review of the internal conflict between beliefs and behaviours. The smoking behaviour might change when the smoker receives a medical report identifying a treatable, smoking-related illness. Likewise, the affair may end when a third party enters the picture bringing a different emotional perspective on the distress caused. In both scenarios, these behaviours were changed by the introduction of additional intellectual or emotional information.

When faced with decisions to give work a higher priority than personal health or family issues, the conflict may be resolved differently, by the same individual, in various contexts. Some beliefs and behaviours are relative and determined by the hierarchy existing in that situation. Common influencing factors are: perceptions of job security; school deadlines; the presence of a critical illness, or; a relationship crisis.

### External Conflict

We each develop a unique sense of our world, resulting from different combinations of influences and experiences such as those in education, family, politics, health and skills development. Therefore, we expect different views and behaviours to stimulate conflict. This conflict can lead to personal and intellectual growth, or to contention. It is our choice.

Ideally, a key to successfully managing conflict is to identify it, understand it and implement a carefully developed plan to resolve it. Well, we don't often have that luxury. So what are our options?

### Interpersonal Conflict

Resolving the source of the conflict is necessary if we wish to prevent further negative outcomes. Developing good conflict resolution skills equips us to more appropriately face conflict. This means developing our personal conflict management pro-

ocol. Taking a stepwise approach, we would: remain calm (otherwise it becomes an unproductive argument); don't personally absorb the “attack” (this invites a return attack); try to determine the trigger (what just happened to spark this); explore the real reason for conflicting views or actions (inadequate information, personal differences, breach of rules, life is unfair, etc.); account for other influences (fatigue, accumulated stress, emotional vulnerability, history, etc); listen to the issues, needs and reason of each view; clearly present the opposing view; define commonalities and differences; work to meet needs while respecting differences and minimizing harm; agree that life can be complicated and accept that opportunities and disadvantages are not distributed equally (a.k.a “Life can be unfair!”).

### Workplace Conflict

Differences in personalities, values, and leadership style all present the context for conflict. In many situations these differences can be overlooked or accepted as being an individual's right to personal expression. However, this is more of a challenge when there is a risk for personal loss or the conflict occurs within teams or in administrative action. Clear expectations, consistent implementation and defined protocols are critical to reducing the occurrence of conflict and minimizing the impact when it does occur. It is beneficial to have an established protocol for resolving conflict.

Conflict resolution does not mean that at the end of the process, everyone has the same view or opinion. But, it does mean that each person respects the other's right to a reasonable opinion or action and where necessary, everyone agrees to behave in a prescribed manner. This is particularly critical in the functioning of organizational committees or boards. Although it is necessary to air varying views and discuss options and consequences, it is equally necessary to come to a mutual agreement on direction and action. Otherwise, the system as a whole is dysfunctional and presents a chaotic image which does not instill trust in those served by the organization.

We may not like an organizational decision, just as we may not like a colleague or the posted speed limit. However, if we choose to reject the defined behavioural standard and insist on acting, based only on our personal view, we must be prepared for the potential of very unpleasant consequences.

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