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## **Conflict:** *Understanding and Managing*

Course No: K02-008

Credit: 2 PDH

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## COURSE OVERVIEW

Conflict is part of everyday work life. We may not even notice only minor irritations because we are so used to them. However, these can easily build into something that can cause great tension within a work team.

This course will help you identify typical reasons for conflict, the three escalating stages of it, and devise strategies for preventing it from getting disruptive. There is also a checklist that students can use to assess the potential for conflict in their workplace.

## LEARNING OUTCOMES

After completion of this course, students will be able to:

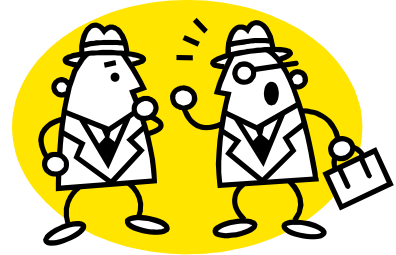
1. Deal successfully with employee conflict
2. Identify the clues that tell you how serious it is becoming
3. Identify causes of employee conflict
4. Reduce causes of employee conflict
5. Take steps to minimize conflict
6. Select an appropriate strategy to handle conflict

## DEALING WITH EMPLOYEE CONFLICTS

These are some common beliefs about conflict: what do you think?

"The presence of conflict is the sign of a poor leader!"

"Conflict" used in a competitive way to generate new ideas or increase productivity to meet an earlier deadline can be a good thing and the sign of a wise leader.



"Anger is always negative and destructive."

Anger can become negative and destructive if allowed to develop and grow.

"Conflict, if left alone, will take care of itself."

Not necessarily. We believe leaders should always be aware of conflict within their groups but not always involved. Sometimes it can take care of itself.



"Conflict must be resolved immediately."

Once again, not necessarily. This is like the one above that can become a problem but is not automatically one requiring the leader's intervention.

## THREE STAGES OF CONFLICT

There are three distinct stages of conflict which are easy to identify if you know what you are looking for. Here are the three stages progressing from the simple daily irritations to the most severe which may lead to termination and even bodily harm.

### STAGE ONE

These are the irritating daily events which can get your day off to a bad start. They stem from on non-personal causes are easy to dispel with a little recognition and awareness.

#### CHARACTERISTICS OF STAGE ONE

You MUST LISTEN FOR these clues:

- Comments are focused on "non-human" topics (machinery, weather, traffic, the "system [computers, the organizational culture, procedures]" etc.)
- Words are in the present tense ("This copier is out of paper".)
- More focus on a solution than the problem ("This copier is out of paper: where is the supply so I can refill it?")



## WAYS TO HANDLE STAGE ONE CONFLICT

Initiate a response that examines the situation.

(“Looks like the copier’s out of paper. Do you know where the stock of it is?”)

Ask if the reaction is proportional to the situation.

(Is anyone carrying “baggage” from previous situations? How would you know? Hint: What tense are they using to describe their position? “You know, all it needs is new paper. Why not save your ranting and raving for the big deals and just put in some new paper?”)

Identify points of agreement and work from these points first and then identify the points of disagreement.

(“I agree with you that it seems like no one else restocks the copier but you. But at least we can rely on you.”)



What kind of Stage One conflict have you seen within yourself recently?

How did you deal with it?

What kind of Stage One conflict have you seen in others?

What, if anything, did you do to help them resolve it?

## STAGE TWO



Stage Two conflicts have become more serious as they become more personal. They are no longer about external events or conditions that we cannot control. Instead, they have become personal challenges requiring “Win-Lose” results.



### CHARACTERISTICS OF STAGE TWO

You must LISTEN FOR these clues:

- Words are in the past tense  
    *(“This copier never has paper in it! It’s always empty!”)*
- Comments are focused on “human” topics (machinery maintenance person, weather man, traffic – a particular driver, the “system [computers service people, the organizational culture - a particular person within it, procedures – a particular person who doesn’t follow them]” etc.  
    *(“I hate people who can’t even restock a copier run they run it out of paper!”)*
- More focus on who caused the problem – or allowed it to happen - than a solution  
    *(“The copier on this floor needs paper. Who is supposed to keep it full?”)*

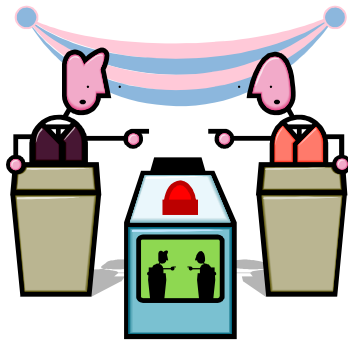
Important considerations for Stage Two:

Coping strategies DO NOT WORK because people are the problem and the conflicts do not go away.

- Self-interest is very important. “CYA” (‘Cover Your Assets’) is a survival strategy.
- People take sides, take notes, and keep score.
- Alliances and cliques may form. A “us” vs. “them” mentality develops.







Discussion of issues and answers are futile because participants and the problem have become too closely entangled. (Similar to a heated political discussion.)

Participants deal in terms that are more general. You will hear about the phantom “them” and comments as “everyone thinks...”, “always...” and “never” increase in frequency. Each side is reluctant to provide facts without asking, “How will you use this information?”

**TRUST IS VERY LOW!**



### WAYS TO HANDLE STAGE TWO CONFLICT

Here are steps that will help you handle Stage Two conflict successfully. The sooner you begin these, the better your chances of keeping it from escalating farther into Stage Three.

- 1) Create a safe environment to discuss the situation which includes:
  - a) Make the setting informal
  - b) Establish neutral turf
- 2) Have an agenda so there is focus on an outcome and not personalities or sides of the issue.

A generic agenda would be one in which both sides agree to take some of the responsibility for reducing the conflict. An easy way to do this is to get each side to “trade” something. (Note: Never say, “GIVE UP” or “CONCEDE” something because that implies losing!)

“Sam, maybe we can work a way to resolve this. Would you be willing to trade proof-reading of your work before you give it to Sue if she will stop making comments about your work quality?”

This way, neither side thinks the other won something and you, the leader, still get the peace and harmony you want.

- 3) Be hard on facts, soft on people.

Take time to get every detail. Clarify generalizations. Who, by name, are “they”? Are you sure that “always” or “never” is accurate?

- 4) Do not let the participants sit across from each other.

Arrange to get them sitting beside each other across from you.

(Sitting across from each other so they make eye contact can start it all again.)



- 5) Do the work as a team sharing in the responsibility of finding an alternative everyone can live with.

Stress the necessity of equal responsibility in finding resolution. Why should you not carry this load for the participants?(Because then it becomes your solution for them and they have nothing invested in making it work.)

- 6) Focus on points of agreement to find a middle ground.

Do not suggest that each side “concedes” something because that implies “giving in”.

“Do you agree that this bickering is becoming an aggravation for the two of you? If so, maybe we can work a way to resolve this. Sam, would you be willing to trade proof-reading of your work before you give it to Sue if she will stop making comments about your work quality?”

Take as much time as necessary to reach agreement without forcing concessions or issues. Avoid voting to resolve issues because that leads to a “win – lose” result. (The only way to avoid having hurt feelings by voting is if you are assured of a unanimous decision before you begin!)



Think about this...

What kind of Stage Two conflict have you seen recently?

What, if anything, did you do to help them resolve it?

## STAGE THREE

If conflict has gotten to Stage Three, it may require professional intervention.

Sides in the conflict have been drawn, probably some very nasty things have been said, and unforgivable acts have been committed.

There is a “slash and burn” mentality on each side who will only be satisfied if their victory comes on the ash heap of the other.

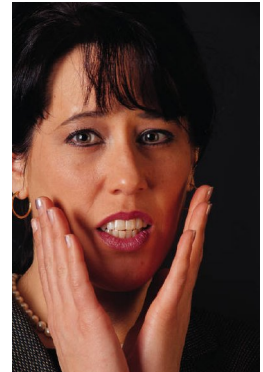


### CHARACTERISTICS OF STAGE 3

The motivation is to “get rid” of the opponent, not just win. Being right and punishing wrong become consuming goals.

The competing parties identify “insiders” and “outsiders”. “You are either with me or against me!” Leaders emerge from the group to act as representatives. You equate your position as doing “what’s good for the organization! [“I have to fire you for the good of the organization”.]”

Specific causes of the problem get lost in the emotion. Many newly recruited team members may not know the origins of the conflict.



**TRUST IS NON-EXISTANT!!**

### WAYS TO HANDLE STAGE THREE CONFLICT

- An outside intervention agent or team (a neutral person or department) is required as a mediator so neither side feels this third party favors the other.
- Details are critical to a thorough understanding of the situation by the mediator.
- You must allow sufficient time to get a true picture of both sides of the case.
- The mediator can ask each side to present their case (without comment from the other) and identify the results they would like to achieve in this process.
- The mediator puts the responsibility on the two teams to find areas of common agreement or trade in search for an agreement.
- Not every participant on both teams may be at Stage 3. Try to break off members at lower stages and redirect their energies away from this situation.

### WARNING

Successful resolution at this level frequently means that something or someone must go! Do not be surprised if that is the “price” for a team to grant concessions.



## CONFLICT ASSESSMENT CHECKLISTS

STAGE ONE CONFLICT		YES	NO
Are the individuals willing to meet and discuss facts?			
Is there a sense of optimism?			
Is there a cooperative spirit?			
Does a "live and let live" attitude typify the atmosphere?			
Can participants discuss issues without involving personalities?			
Can the participants remain in the present tense?			
Is the language specific?			
Do solutions dominate the efforts?			
What else?			
STAGE TWO CONFLICT		YES	NO
Is there a competitive attitude?			
Is there an emphasis on winners and losers?			
Is it hard to talk about problems without including people?			
Is the language in generalities?			
Can you identify these statements in their conversations:	"They..."		
	"Everyone is..."		
	"You always (or never)..."		
	"He always (or never)..."		
Is there a cautious nature when issues are discussed?			
Can you detect a "CYA" attitude among participants?			
Does either party make an effort to "look good" or play a political game?			
STAGE THREE CONFLICT		YES	NO
Are attempts being made to get rid of others?			
Is there an intention to hurt someone?			
Have obvious leaders or spokespersons emerged?			
Is there a choosing of sides?			
Has corporate good become identified with a set of special interests?			
Is there a sense of "holy mission" on the part of certain participants?			
Is there a sense that things will never stop?			
Has there been a loss of middle ground allowing only "right or wrong", "either / or", or "totally black and white" options?			
WHAT ELSE?			

## PERSONAL CAUSES FOR EMPLOYEE CONFLICT

(These are excellent topics for discussion within a department if there seems to be some conflict and the leader wants to stimulate some discussion about it.)

### DIFFERENCES IN VALUES

What are some reasons why employees within a department may have different values?

(There could be differences in age, backgrounds, economic conditions, education, and work ethics. Remember, different does not mean better or worse!)



Think about this...

How would you resolve these issues?

What would you say and/or do?

### ASSUMPTIONS



Think about this...

"I thought you were going to finish that project for me! Now you've made me miss the deadline!"

(What assumptions have you made recently that did or could have led to problems?)

How would you resolve these issues? What would you say and/or do?

## COMPETING FOR SCARCE RESOURCES

"Fred and I are both competing for the promotion. I wonder how we'll get along after one of us doesn't get it!"

(People compete for scarce resources such as time with the boss, access to a copier or printer, parking spots, or anything of perceived value.)



Think about this...

How have you personally dealt with an issue like this or watched other tries to deal with it?

## THE INABILITY TO HANDLE CHANGE

The "Stockdale Paradox" is a useful approach for handling change. Review this section several times so you can offer it as a way to help others get through their change-induced problems.



Vice Admiral James Bond Stockdale, USN, retired, (1923-2005), served on active duty in the regular Navy for 37 years. Most of those years were at sea as a fighter pilot aboard aircraft carriers.

Shot down on his third combat tour over North Vietnam, he was the senior naval service prisoner of war in Hanoi for 7-1/2 years. He was tortured 15 times, in solitary confinement for four years, leg irons for two. He was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor.

The author of "Good to Great" asked Admiral Stockdale which prisoners did not make it through the years of prisoner-of-war confinement. His reply, "Oh, that's easy: the optimists!"

When the author admitted he did not understand, the Admiral clarified by saying, "The optimists were the ones who said, 'We're going to be out by Christmas.' And Christmas would come and go. Then they would say, 'We'll be out by Easter.' And Easter would come and go. And then it would be Thanksgiving and Christmas again. And they died of a broken heart."

Then he turned to the author and said, "This is a very important lesson. You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end – which you can never afford to lose – with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they may be."

### The Stockdale Paradox

**Retain faith that you will prevail in the end, regardless of the difficulties AND AT THE SAME TIME confront the most brutal facts of your current reality whatever they may be.**



Think about

Think of a major life-changing event that you have experienced. What were some of the "brutal facts" associated with it?

How did the way you chose to deal with those brutal facts impact the eventual outcome of the event on your life?

What lessons did you learn from it?

Would the "Stockdale Paradox" be useful in helping your department deal with pending change?  
Why or why not?

If you think it would, how would you present it to your associates?



How could you use an example like this to reduce conflict in your department?

.....

(Author's Note: This is an actual situation that a manager reported to me when I was the operations training manager for a large bank in the southeastern US.)

"I provided every employee with a piece of paper that listed a co-worker's name and told them to list two positive characteristics about that employee on the paper.



The sign says, "Do You Know What Your Co-workers Think About You?"

Then we collected all the papers and I read each person's name and the positive characteristics in front of everyone at the meeting.

We also worked with a department employee to create a poster board that said, "Do You Know What Your Co-Workers Think about You?"

That poster also listed everyone's name and what their teammates had said about them. Comments were like, "Angela has a nice smile". "Mary always has time to help others."

I can think of five people who would have never volunteered to do extra duties in the department that have recently approached their supervisor asking if there were extra duties needing attention. In addition, I have noticed some simple things such as a few employees that have had past bad attitudes that are actually smiling at work!"

## ENVIRONMENTAL CAUSES FOR EMPLOYEE CONFLICT

Sometimes, the workplace environment can cause conflict between team members. Here are some examples.

### STRESS FROM VAGUE EXPECTATIONS, DIRECTIONS, AND PROCEDURES

What is the difference between “work pressure” and “stress”?

(Think back to when you did reports for a teacher in school. When you clearly knew the expectations, you were able to work confidently even though you were under pressure to complete it. But, when it was turned in, you were relieved and could forget about it because you knew you met the expectations. This situation would be work pressure.

However, when you were not sure of the expectations, you constantly worried whether you were doing it correctly. When you finally turned it in, the worry probably remained because you were not sure whether it was correct. This inability to have confidence in your performance or to get closure when you finished is an example of work stress.)

Examples of PRESSURE in your work place	Examples of STRESS in your work place

How can measurable goals using references to quality, quantity, and time reduce stress in your personal and work life?

What would goals like that do for your self-confidence?                      y?

What would that do for your work performance?                      Why?

## THE WORK ENVIRONMENT

The work environment is crowded, noisy, dark, dirty, and cold. i.e., “uncomfortable”

What may be some specific examples of this in your department?

## REASONS WHY EMPLOYEES MAY TRY TO AVOID RESOLVING CONFLICT

There are many reasons why people try to avoid conflict. Obviously, working together in harmony is more productive and enjoyable but some people employ very specific strategies to keep from “rocking the boat” in the workplace.

## ACTION ANXIETY

“If I do something, I could get in trouble. I’ll play it safe and do nothing.”

When have you ever felt this way at work?

What were the long-term results for you?



## NEGATIVE FANTASIES

The fear of something-terrible happening is usually much worse than the actual conflict itself. A person may “worst-case” himself or herself into inactivity.

When have you ever felt this way at work?

What were the long-term results for you?

### REAL RISK

There is a real risk that the other person may get violent or abuse his/her power to cause problems for me.

When have you ever felt this way at work?

What were the long-term results for you?

### FEAR OF SEPARATION

A fear that “you won’t like me” if I stand up for my position

When have you ever felt this way at work?

What were the long-term results for you?

### FEAR OF CONFLICT

If you never saw constructive conflict as a child growing up, you have never learned how to manage it and may fear that any conflict always results in physical and/or emotional abuse.

When have you ever felt this way at work?

What were the long-term results for you?

### THE BASIC STEPS TO MINIMIZE CONFLICT

- Both parties must be aware there is a conflict!
- They must be willing to focus on facts and behaviors, not opinions and feelings.
- They must be willing to identify and share their real needs and objectives.
- They must search for commonalities instead of focusing on differences.
- They must agree that being different in beliefs does not mean being right, wrong, better, or worse.
- They must be willing to look for alternate or unconventional solutions that will meet the needs of both parties.
- They must keep any commitments they made as part of the agreement process.

## STRATEGIES FOR HANDLING CONFLICT

There are four distinctly different methods of handling most situations of conflict.

Which style have you seen people use?

What were their long-term results?

Which is your preferred style?

How have the long-term results of that been?

### THE "COMPETITOR" STYLE

"I win and you lose!"

Usually the winner is the one with the greatest power (the boss). "Do it this way because I'm the boss!"

Have you seen this happen?

What is the result in terms of employee work performance for the long term?

What is the long-term result on the employee?



ADVANTAGES		DISADVANTAGES	
Some immediate action is taken.		Employees never learn to make decisions – always wait for the boss.	
Problems can be handled quickly – especially in an emergency.		Problems receive little attention absent an emergency unless the boss is standing over the employees.	
No overt arguments.		Employees grumble to each other and may sabotage work or equipment.	
Things get done!		Employees withhold information from boss and celebrate when things go wrong.	

## THE "ACCOMODATOR" STYLE



"You win and I lose!"

A person is more concerned about preserving the relationship than trying to clarify and resolve issues.

This is also known as "The Personal Doormat" approach to dealing with conflict.

ADVANTAGES		DISADVANTAGES	
Apparent good will and harmony.	Little outward conflict.	Increased internal resentment by the one who accommodates because his/her needs are not being met.	
May be effective when an issue is more important to one than the other.			
		May create an unintentional expectation in the other assuming you will always accommodate.	Conflict is not actually resolved and may worsen.

Have you seen this happen?

What is the result in terms of employee work performance for the long term?

What is the long-term result on the employee?

## THE "AVOIDER" STYLE

"I don't want to talk about it!"

A person fears damage to the relationship or facing unpleasant consequences if they confront the issue.

Have you seen this happen?

What is the result in terms of employee work performance for the long term?

What is the long-term result on the participants?



ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
May initially feel more comfortable to both sides.	Low situational satisfaction on the part of the people involved.
You can avoid personal involvement.	No opportunity to <u>learn</u> how to handle conflicts.
Reduces loud and disruptive fights.	Necessary decisions are not made in a timely fashion.
At times, it may be wise to avoid a confrontation (highly charged emotions, drugs, alcohol, etc.)	The conflict usually gets worse and may explode at an inappropriate time and place.



## THE "COLLABORATOR" STYLE

"We work together to attack the problem, not each other!!"

Identifies what each needs and wants. Then focus on each side getting essential needs and willing to give up wants for sake of agreement.



Have you seen this happen?

What is the result in terms of employee work performance for the long term?

What is the long-term result on the participants?

ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
Real, not just apparent, good will and harmony.	Time consuming to identify individual needs and wants.
Little outward or inward conflict remains.	Requires trust between each participant or a 3 <sup>rd</sup> party that each trusts.
Both sides retain self-respect and strengthen their relationship.	Neither has the satisfaction of a "complete victory".
Solution is likely to last longer and require less "maintenance".	Must be willing to face some level of conflict while keeping eyes on the ultimate goal of a mutually acceptable outcome.