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Topic 1 – Identifying Conflict

Learning Outcomes:

Identify the signs, stages and possible causes of conflict in the workplace.

At the end of this topic you will be able to:

- * Describe signs of potential or actual conflict
- * Describe the stages of conflict
- * Describe factors within an individual, which relate to the developing conflict
- * Describe the factors within the work place which relate to the developing conflict
- * Describe factors outside the work place which contribute to conflict

Introduction

Welcome to *Dealing with Conflict*. In the first part of this booklet we will:

- Identify the signs of conflict
- Look at the stages of development of conflict and how it develops.
- How people respond to and deal with conflict; and
- Factors that can add to and influence the way conflict develop.

1. What is conflict?

Conflict is something that happens, which leads to tension within or between individuals in their lives, at home or at work.

Conflict is not easy to explain. One person might experience conflict in a particular situation, and another person may not.

Conflict happens when there is a clash between people and their organisations.

It can be recognised easily or sometimes difficult to see.

Either way, it usually involves a person feeling that they or their goals are being threatened.

Sometimes the feeling might be the result of a misunderstanding. But whether it is real or imagined, both are conflict situations.

2. Signs of Conflict

There are several signs which include:

- Change in a person's behavior
- Moodiness
- Cry or get upset easily
- Non-cooperation
- Withdrawing from others
- Anxiety and tension
- Aggression

3. Stages of Conflict

Conflict can go through different stages, starting with a person feeling uncomfortable and ending with a fight.

There are five main stages that conflict can go through:

Discomfort

It might be hard to know what the problem is, but people feel uncomfortable. People may not have said anything yet, but the feeling is there . They may also become silent and withdrawn or behave differently.

Incidents

These are things that happen which make people feel upset or angry. For example, sometimes small changes to routine at work can make people behave in unusual ways.

Misunderstandings

Misunderstandings can occur when one person misunderstands someone else's intention or what they have said. For example, a person might think their work colleague is being critical, but he or she might just have been trying to be helpful.

Tension

People in conflict are tense with each other, don't really trust each other and are suspicious or resentful when talking to each other. A person might look tense, smoke more or do things, which indicate stress. They may also be worried about how they get along with each other.

Crisis

At the crisis stage the people in conflict are no longer able to behave in a normal way. Their behaviour may change or they might become aggressive. People find it hard to carry on with things as if everything is OK, especially if big changes have taken place in their lives.

* Now turn to item 2 on the worksheet

4. Factors within individuals that influence conflict

People will be influenced by their attitudes and values. The things that people think are important to them personally, will determine how they respond to conflict.

There are five main ways of responding to conflict, and different people will respond in different ways.

A person may use more than one way of responding to the same conflict.

Let's look at the five ways.

Withdrawing

- A person may withdraw to avoid having to say anything about the conflict.
- They just want to stay out of the conflict, regardless of their own need.
- People are often afraid of 'getting involved', or they see it as easier to withdraw from the conflict rather than face it.

Forcing

- The person who uses this response is not interested in the other person or the organisation's goals.
- They pursue their own interests regardless of others.

They don't care if people like them or not, just as long as they get what they want.

Smoothing

- The person who uses this response usually wants to be liked by everyone.
- This person tries to make sure relationships are not damaged by the conflict.
- He or she sees the conflict as damaging to people and they try to smooth things over and keep everyone friendly.

Compromising

- This person takes the 'middle ground' in a conflict.
- They take the view that finding agreement between people is the best way to solve conflict.
- They will give up some of their own goals, but not all of them.
- They will risk a losing a part of their good relationship with others, but not totally.
- This person also feels others should be prepared to give up some of their goals.

Negotiating

- This person looks at a conflict as a problem to be solved.
- The negotiator would not be afraid of conflict or see it as a bad thing.
- A person who believes in negotiating, thinks that negotiation means that everyone involved has their goals met and as result relationships can improve.
- The person who negotiates does not think that people have to give up some of their goals, but looks for common ground so that agreement can be reached.
- Negotiation requires people to come to an agreement about things, regardless of whether they have the same goals or not.
- The person, who negotiates, thinks that it's best to sort out bad feelings between people and this helps improve relationships.

5. Other factors which influence conflict within a person.

Everyone responds differently to conflict at home and at work.

The way a person respond may depend on who is involved as well as the position each holds in a community or at work.

A person's gender or culture may influence the way a person responds to conflict.

There are various factors in the work place, which influence conflict.

6. Structure of the workplace

Workplaces usually have bosses at the top and workers at the bottom of the organisation.

There is usually a structure making it clear who is responsible to whom.

When a conflict is happening or about to happen the senior staff member has the most influence over what happens, because they are in charge.

Senior staff are expected to make decisions about conflict.

If the lines of responsibility or accountability in an organisation are not clear, then staff might be confused about who makes decisions and this can cause conflict.

7. Job descriptions and work processes.

If a job description gives several workers the same and responsibilities, this can create confusion about who does what.
Job descriptions should be clear, so that everyone understands each other's role and they can work as a team.
Confusion about roles is a major cause of conflict in the work place.
The way communication and information systems are organised is important in preventing conflict.

8. Competition at work.

Everyone has his or her own priorities and interests at work.
If people think differently then this can lead to conflict with other staff.
Some people want to get recognition and promotion, so they may be very competitive and disagree with anyone who has a different idea to them.
They may respond in a way that leads to conflict if they are criticised or corrected.

9. The interests of the workplace and workers

All organisations have their own goals. Some organisations want to get bigger, become recognised by government, stay within their budget and get work done on time.
If the interests of the workplace and workers are similar, conflict is less likely to happen.
Sometimes there is a clash of interests between the workplace and workers.
If the goals and interests of the workplace are not agreed upon, the conflict can be the result.

10. Management abilities.

Good management of people and systems of working will lead to better working relationships and less conflict.

If there are management problems the staff become confused or frustrated. Management skills are needed to deal with conflict when it happens. Therefore, communication, organisational and negotiating skills are important.

11. Factors outside the work place, which can lead to conflict.

Sometimes people bring personal issues to work without actually realising they are doing it. They may be worried about family, health or finances.

Workers have a wide range of skills and behaviours that they bring to the work place. A work place is an interesting place, because it has such a different range of people.

When workers are worried about personal problems or have different cultural backgrounds, this can influence the way conflict is dealt with.

Sometimes something might be said in a joke, but someone might take offence and react to it angrily.

People work well together if they know each other. Sometimes there is rivalry between workers and this causes conflict. They might support different football teams or their families may have had a fight.

Both workers would want to be loyal to their own family and this could cause difficulties at work. Personal worries, how people communicate with each other or other experiences can lead to a conflict getting worse.

* Now turn to item 3 on the worksheet

Summary

In this topic we looked at identifying the signs of potential or actual conflict. We discussed the stages of conflict, so you could see how a conflict may develop and increase. Then we looked at the factors within individuals which affect how different people react to conflict

We then looked at factors within the work place, which can influence the way conflict develops. Finally, the factors outside the work place which can contribute to conflict were discussed

Topic 2 – Strategies for Dealing with Conflict

Learning Outcomes:

Propose strategies to deal with a conflict in the work place.

At the end of this topic you will be able to:

*Outline strategies which provide options for constructive responses to the conflict

*Outline strategies which enable established work relationships to continue

Introduction

Welcome to Topic2. In this topic we will be looking at some strategies, or approaches, which can be used to deal with conflicts, which happen in the workplace.

We will look at why certain strategies are useful, the steps involved in dealing with conflict and the process for ‘mapping’ a conflict will be outlined.

Finally we will look at strategies, which allow relationships in the work place to continue after there has been a conflict.

1. Strategies for dealing with conflict.

In Part 1 we looked at the ways people might respond to conflict. Strategies for dealing with conflict are related to these 5 types of responses.

The strategy a person uses depends on several factors to do with the people in the conflict.

It is important to know about the five responses and when to use them in the right way at the right time.

It involves making a judgement about the conflict and deciding what to do.

2. Factors to think about before choosing a strategy.

- How important is the relationship between the people involved
- What are the goals of the people or organisation
- Are the people flexible with their views

3. Rules for dealing with Conflict

- You cannot use withdrawal for a long period of time.
- If you force others to do what you want, the conflict will continue
- Smoothing only works when people share goals
- Compromise is a useful short term strategy
- Admitting that there is a problem is an important first step
- Keep a sense of humour
- Accept that conflicts will arise, but can be dealt with constructively
- Accept that the manager has a specific job to do in order to keep the organisation running smoothly

4. Mapping the conflict

A conflict map is simply a diagram, which shows the needs (wants, interests, values) and fears (concerns, worries) of each person or group involved in a conflict. After listing the needs and fears, the conflict is briefly described and an approach to dealing with it is outlined

Mapping is a problem solving approach, which allows you to work out which strategies can be used to deal with conflict.

Look at the example below:

A supervisor in the office of a community organisation notices that the receptionist is often away from the desk because she is having problems with her four-year-old daughter. She has to ask other people in the office to cover her receptionist duties.

The staff want the supervisor to say something to the receptionist, but the supervisor finds it hard to approach her. The supervisor knows that the receptionist is a sole parent and is having problems, so she decides to map the conflict to come up with possible ways of dealing with it. The Map gives her a clearer picture of who is involved and what is going on in the situation.

The map looks like the following diagram.

Supervisor	
Needs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> To have work done <input type="checkbox"/> To report to manager <input type="checkbox"/> To care about receptionist <input type="checkbox"/> To have a good team 	Fears <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Losing respect from manager <input type="checkbox"/> Being seen as ‘bossy’ <input type="checkbox"/> Losing control of the situation <input type="checkbox"/> Workers anger <input type="checkbox"/> Workers anger <input type="checkbox"/> Upsetting receptionist
Receptionist	
Needs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> To look after child <input type="checkbox"/> To earn money <input type="checkbox"/> To cope as a mother <input type="checkbox"/> To get on well with team <input type="checkbox"/> To have job security 	Fears <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Losing job <input type="checkbox"/> Failing as a mother <input type="checkbox"/> Being rejected <input type="checkbox"/> Not coping with things <input type="checkbox"/> Having her child reported as being neglected
Others in team	
Needs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> To do their own work <input type="checkbox"/> To be respected <input type="checkbox"/> To care for receptionist and still get their work done <input type="checkbox"/> To have a good receptionist 	Fears <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Things will get worse <input type="checkbox"/> Being used unfairly <input type="checkbox"/> Having to say yes <input type="checkbox"/> Loss of power <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of support

By looking at the map, the supervisor is able to think of some ways in which she can approach the conflict, such as:

- Holding a staff meeting about the issue
- Helping the receptionist set priorities
- Helping the receptionist find better child care
- Sharing the receptionist job between two people working part time
- Setting up a roster so relief work on reception is fairly shared

Thinking about these options help her to feel more confident about tackling the situation. She can also see that there may be solutions, which meet some of everyone’s needs.

She can now:

- Write down how she will go about dealing with the conflict
- Then decide to talk to the receptionist and staff about the problems and possible solutions
- Approach the receptionist about a private meeting

* Now turn to item 4 on the worksheet

5. Maintaining relationships in conflict situations

We have looked at a range of responses for dealing with conflict. However, work situations will always test people's ability to work with each other and to negotiate work agreements that everyone is happy with. An ability to negotiate in conflict situations is vital for people who work together.

If negotiation is used as the main strategy for dealing with a conflict situation, there are five steps involved in resolving the conflict.

Defining the conflict

- If people involved do not agree on what the conflict is about, they cannot begin to deal with it.
- Everyone needs to say what they want and how they feel
- Of ten a manager or supervisor who is not involved in the conflict needs to help two people get together and work it out.
- People might find it hard to say what they want and feel.
- If both people can say how they feel and what they want, the conflict is easier to deal with.

Exchanging reasons.

- Involves the people in the conflict talking to each other about why they want certain things or about how they feel
- The more you understand the view of others, the more likely it is that you will talk to each other and have a better understanding of the conflict
- The discussion should be about what each person needs and wants rather than just stating a position. (What they want)
- Each person involved focuses on their needs and explains why they are important to them.
- Be respectful and listen carefully to what the other says

Changing Perspectives

- If people are to deal with conflict well, they need to be able to see the conflict from the other person's point of view.
- Do not think everyone sees things in the same way
- The more you understand the perspective of others, the more likely it is that you will communicate to each other
- If you try to understand the others view point, then you will think more broadly about the conflict and how to deal with it

Finding options

- People in the conflict try to come up with ideas to deal with it
- It's always best to come up with several options
- The more options there are, the more likely it is that a suitable one will be found
- Talk about what each of you is doing and not doing that is causing the conflict to continue
- Draw up a list of options for resolving the conflict

Reaching an agreement

- People involved in the conflict decide which options they can agree to act upon
- Treat all people fairly when deciding on options
- A final agreement should show how things will be done differently
- Review the agreement in the future (decide this when reaching an agreement)
- If an agreement cannot be reached, then try the whole process again.

6. Agreement factors to consider in maintaining work relationships

The option that is chosen needs to suit the organisation and other staff as well as the staff in conflict.

7. Non-negotiable conflicts.

Sometimes reaching an agreement is genuinely not possible, which include:

- The thing being done or proposed is illegal
- When a person feels discriminated against
- When a person strongly feels they should say no

Sometimes the relationship with the other person is not one, which allows you to reach an agreement.

If you feel you are being threatened or manipulated it is always possible to say no, without giving a reason.

If you say no, be sure that the reason is good enough.

Always be prepared to talk and negotiate.

* Now turn to item 5 on the students worksheet

Summary.

In this topic we looked at strategies that can be use to deal with conflict in the work place. We tried to identify which strategies were most useful in particular conflict situations. The steps involved in dealing with conflict were described and a process for ‘mapping’ a conflict was outlined

Finally, we looked at strategies that make it possible for relationships in the work place to continue after there has been a conflict. We considered the work place issues involved when negotiating an agreement after a conflict.

Topic 3 – Responding to Conflict

Learning Outcomes

Use communication skills that encourage constructive responses to conflict in the work place.

At the end of this topic you will be able to:

- * Describe factors affecting timing and environment for communicating
- * Use effective non-verbal and verbal communication including
 - Body language
 - Questioning
 - Language style
 - Active listening
 - Reflecting
- * Give assertive feedback.
- * Receive feedback non defensively

Introduction.

Welcome to Topic 3. This topic deals with one of the most important aspects of dealing with conflict – communication. If people are able to communicate with each other then it is much easier to resolve problems. We will look at the importance of timing and the environment in relation to communication. We will look at the use of effective communication, verbal and non-verbal. Assertive communication skills are also part of this booklet.

Finally, we will look at ways of receiving feedback from others in a non-defensive way. All these factors are important communication skills.

1. Timing and environment

The timing and environment can make a big difference in the way conflict is dealt with. If people feel comfortable and at ease, then they are able to talk more freely. If a person doesn't like a place or it's held at a time that makes them feel angry, then communication becomes difficult.

Selecting the right time

The time should be suitable and agreed upon by all people.

Selection of the right place

The place should be chosen carefully. Issues as to if the place is comfortable, private and quiet are very important.

- Sometimes it's better to be in a 'neutral' place away from work.
- If the meeting is held on 'home ground' then one of the people may feel in control and the other disadvantaged.
- It is best not to deal with conflicts in anyone's home or in someone's office, especially if that person is a boss or supervisor.
- Agree on a venue, which doesn't give anyone an advantage. The balance of power needs to feel more equal.

* Now turn to item 6 on the worksheet

2. Gender, culture and relationship considerations

In Topic 1 we looked at identifying issues connected to being male or female and cultural background. We said this could have an influence on dealing with conflict.

Where the discussion regarding the conflict takes place, as well as who is involved, could be affected by these issues.

- If a woman feels powerless in a conflict with a man, she might want another woman there for support.
- A person, who is a relative of the boss or the staff member, may not want people connected to them in the room.
- It might be seen as important to have older people involved, so that issues can be dealt with in a culturally correct way.
- When people are from different backgrounds it is often helpful to have other people as observers.
- Sometimes it is possible to ask other people to resolve conflict on your behalf, so the people involved do not have to face each other until it has been dealt with.

If the relationship between people is good they will understand each other more easily. If the relationship is bad then they will probably need help from others.

* Now turn to item 7 on the worksheets

3. Effective verbal and non-verbal communication

Communication may be:

- Verbal (spoken) or
- Non-verbal (not spoken)

Both types of communication are important in managing conflict.

The **way** we communicate will affect the messages that others receive from us. Therefore it is not only important what we say, but also:

- How we say it
- The way we look and act when we say something

Remember the message we **think** we are giving might not be the one the other person is actually receiving.

- If verbal and non-verbal communication match, communication will be at its best.
- When verbal and non-verbal communication does not match then misunderstandings occur.

For example, when body language shows a person is angry, such as clenched fists and looking tense, and the person says they are not angry.

This gives a mixed message creating confusion for the person receiving the communication.

4. Non-verbal communication

Another name for non-verbal communication is 'body language'.

Body language is the sign we give to others in the way we act and look, rather than what we say.

Most of what we say is through non-verbal communication. It is often true that that people will take more notice of the body language than what was actually said.

There are only general guidelines about ‘correct’ non-verbal communication. This is because ‘communication rules’ are different between different cultural groups. Touching and eye contact are very common in the west, but often taboo in Asian culture.

However, there are some body language things that mean the same in most cultures.

- If a person has their arms folded in front of them, but is looking away when you are speaking, this usually means they are not interested in what you are saying.

It’s difficult talking to someone who is looking away from you.

* Now turn to item 8 on the worksheet

5. Verbal communication

Verbal communication is not just ‘talking’, it is:

- The choice of words we use
- The tone of voice we use, and
- The way we listen and respond to what is said

6. Language

This can make a difference to communication because people will be able to deal with conflict best in the language they are comfortable with.

Sometimes it might necessary to:

- Agree about the language that is used
- Consider an interpreter
- Everyone uses a third language
- Use language creatively

7. Language styles

The style of language includes:

- Tone
- Words
- How words are said, and
- Common expressions that people use in verbal communication

The tone of voice can make a big difference in how effective the message is. For example, some people speak quite loudly all the time and others speak softly/gently.

People need to be aware of their effect on others when talking, because a simple misunderstanding about the way something was said could threaten the conflict negotiation and make the situation worse.

Similarly, the people involved must think carefully about what is said, so everyone understands what is being said and suggested.

Using words that others don't understand leads to people feeling ashamed or embarrassed.

Some common, local expressions that people use can cause problems if not everyone understands them. Avoid using these expressions unless you are sure everyone understands them.

* Now turn to item 9 on the worksheet

8. Questioning.

Asking questions during communication can show genuine interest in understanding the other person's point of view.

However, it is important to ask questions in a 'non-threatening' way.

Avoid asking 'why' questions.

For example: asking 'why did you do that'?

This can indicate that the person asking the questions isn't happy with what the other person did, and can block communication.

By using words such as, 'would you like to talk about your reasons for doing it this way', opens up discussion and encourages the person to talk.

Form questions in a way that enables the person to discuss more fully what is going on, instead of just giving a 'yes' or 'no' answer.

If you say 'do you like your job'? The person can answer 'No' and that is the end of the communication.

Better to say, 'would you like to tell me about your job'?

9. Listening and reflecting

Listening and reflecting is sometimes called 'active listening.

This is because you are listening and then repeating back using different words, what the person is telling you.

Reflecting back helps people to be sure that they have understood what the other person is saying.

For example, you are talking with someone about a conflict situation and they say:

- 'Everything is going wrong for me at the moment'.

You need not agree, disagree or pass comment. You can say:

- 'So you feel like things just aren't going your way right now'.

You haven't agreed or disagreed and you haven't altered what they have said, just re-worded it.

The person might then say:

- 'Well not everything, just some things are going wrong'.

You can keep listening and responding until they have said what they really wanted to say.

You might need to add to the conversation to show the other person you are listening as well as understanding what is said.

Your comment should not push or contradict them or force your own opinion. You may say:

- 'So would you like to talk more about what some of them are?'

The other person might have so much to say that you need to check back to make sure you have heard and interpreted correctly.

This can be very useful in conflict situations as it can increase understanding of what the conflict is about and clear up misunderstandings.

Active listening is only part of your strategy to resolve conflict.

That is, the part where you need to understand what is happening to another person, when they are trying to talk about their own interests, and you want to show that you are really listening to what they are saying and trying to understand their point of view.

10. Assertive feedback

How we respond to people can make a big difference on whether the conflict is resolved or not

It is important to respect and listen to each other, but it is also important that the people involved keep their self-respect and their rights in the situation.

- Assertive communication makes it possible for the people in the conflict to respect each other.
- Assertive feedback is communication, which insists on protecting your own rights, while being respectful of others.**

When we give feedback to someone, we make a choice about the style of communication we will use.

When dealing with conflict, there is a temptation to respond with anger, especially if we feel hurt by the other person.

It is important to learn to control emotions rather than let them control us. This way a conflict will not get worse or out of control.

11. Aggressive communication

Aggressive communication is of no use whatsoever.

It is merely an attempt to hurt someone or destroy something, such as a relationship.

It can involve:

- Insults
- Things said that make the listener feel inferior
- Calling people names, like 'idiot' and 'stupid'.
- Physical violence

- Denying peoples right to be treated with dignity

Aggressive communication includes:

- Shouting
- Blaming
- Humiliating
- Demanding
- Accusing, or
- Punching

12. Passive or submissive communication.

Passive communication involves:

- Saying nothing when provoked
- Hiding your feelings
- Letting others reject your right to self respect
- Letting others tell you what to do

This doesn't assist the conflict because not everyone gains.

The passive person loses or fails to get their interests taken into account, and then goes on feeling unhappy with the situation.

Passive communication includes:

- Apologising unnecessarily
- Hesitating
- Putting yourself down, and
- Giving in

13. Assertive communication

Involves describing your feelings, thoughts, opinions and preferences directly to the other person in an honest way that shows respect for yourself and the other person.

It means standing up for yourself, and you honestly say what is best for you, whilst not rejecting the rights of others.

Assertive communication is:

- Direct
- Honest
- Not harmful to others, and

- Appropriate for dealing with conflict.

Dealing with conflict in an effective way involves giving others feedback in an assertive rather than an aggressive way.

Examples of phrases using assertive feedback are:

- 'When you speak to me in this way I feel...'
- 'I feel angry, disappointed, frustrated etc'.
- 'In future I would like it if you....'

14. Non-defensive feedback

In addition to giving assertive feedback, it is important that feedback from others is responded to in a non-defensive manner.

Defensive responses assume that people are attacking you, so you react by defending yourself.

The defensive response can set off a downward spiral known as the 'attack and defend spiral'. This means that once someone has responded defensively, the other will attack again. The situation gets worse and worse. For example, a person might say:

- 'You've been late for work three times this week'

A response might be:

- 'Everyone else comes late as well' (defensive)

Followed by this response:

- 'Also, you haven't finished the report I wanted and I expect you will want to finish early on Friday'.

Defensiveness results from and causes misunderstandings.

It is often an instant reaction to something said to us.

Communication techniques such as listening and reflecting can help avoid defensive reactions, especially if we feel hurt or criticised.

* Now turn to item 10 on the worksheet

Summary

In Part 3 we have looked at responding to conflict.

We looked at the use of effective communication, verbal and non-verbal as well as the influence of language. We then talked about the importance of active listening and asking questions in a way to understand the other person's point of view. We considered communication responses that are assertive, rather than passive or aggressive.

Finally, we looked at ways of receiving feedback from others in a non-defensive way as another strategy in dealing with conflict. All these factors are important in ensuring that communication with others in the workplace helps people to work together and deal more effectively with conflict.

This has been a topic, which helps to build up your skills in communication, as well as helping you to deal with conflict easier. The more that you practice the things you have learned in this topic, the easier it will become.