



24 Conflict : A turning point



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Leaflet No. 24, entitled "Conflict: A turning point", is for everyone who has questions about the existence of real or potential conflict within a group. This leaflet will help people recognize a conflict, understand what is going on, know what action to take, and explore possible solutions.

Resources

To obtain reference material and to find useful tools or competent resource persons, please contact the FCPPQ.

We offer :

- Advice;
- Information brochures;
- References;
- Training workshops.

Visit our web site www.fcppq.qc.ca or contact your regional association through the Parents' Committee at your School Board

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Conflict : A turning point to give your group a renewed impetus



When ideas collide,
understanding ensues.

What is a conflict?

Conflict, whether open or hidden, is something we must all face sooner or later. Conflict is an escalating confrontation between two or more people over wishes, needs, ideas, principals, and values.

Contrary to appearances, people in conflict are often pursuing the same objective, but they are unable to agree on the measures needed to reach that objective. Moreover, our culture is largely based on power relationships and the notion that there has to be a winner and a loser. Since it is impossible for human beings to continually accept compromises or obey an arbitrary authority, conflict becomes the only way to reestablish a balance of power during a time of crisis.

What is the difference between a conflict and a simple disagreement?

A conflict is characterized by a climate of tension brought about by the apparent impossibility of reaching an agreement that is acceptable to all concerned. Adversaries make hurtful statements and accusations, treat each other with contempt, and develop strategies to defeat the opponent. The ties of confidence and collaboration are broken. Members of the group feel divided and afraid and are no longer able to act objectively and effectively.

Conflict should not be confused with the exchange of differing opinions, which is a sign of perfectly healthy group dynamics. In fact, discussions, even heated ones, often lead to a better understanding of common objectives and the development of constructive solutions. Many relatively stormy debates can culminate in the creation of stimulating projects, stronger ties of friendship, and a renewed energy. By contrast, conflict creates a deadlock that impedes the momentum of all those who are a part of it.

What to do when conflict arises?

Who is responsible for the conflict?

Looking for a guilty party is a dangerous game that results in little more than finger pointing. From this first accusation is born a series of justifications and positionings that will lead to organized camps prepared for a pitched battle. There is a golden rule to avoid triggering all-out war: In a conflict situation, everyone involved is part of both the problem and the solution. This means that each member of the group holds an essential key to solving the problem.

Buy peace and we
'll deliver war.

What are the most common reactions to conflict?

For the majority among us, conflict is a source of fear and produces a feeling of failure. No doubt that is why we tend to deny it or silence it, hoping that it will resolve itself. Yet time rarely solves the problem. Unresolved conflicts lead to abuse, victimization, apathy, and resentment. None of this is conducive to action! The second rule in conflict management is to admit conflict exists and to talk openly about it.

Who can act to try to resolve a conflict?

Managing conflict requires a good dose of courage and leadership. Any member of the group who has enough insight and self-restraint not to be carried away by his emotions can take the initiative to manage.

How do we resolve conflict?

First, it is important to be aware of one's own attitudes and conduct. Since all the opposing parties feed the conflict through their words, their deeds, and the stands they take, each person must question his influence and reasons for acting.

Furthermore, the person who takes the initiative to look for solutions to the conflict must choose the right moment to speak to the group about his observations.

This person can initiate the process proposed below or can invite the group to name a moderator from among its members. In some cases, it is preferable to call on an outside resource person to play this role.

The initiator or the chosen moderator will establish rules that allow all members of the group to express their feelings, fears, needs, values, and objectives. The following rules should be emphasized:

- Speak in the first person (for example, "I feel I am wasting my time when we don't begin on time"), without implicating another member of the group (for example, "Peter and Jane feel like I do!" or "Everyone agrees on this point.");
- Accusations, insinuations, presumptions, or any other verbal attack should not be tolerated;
- When one member of the group is speaking, the others are not allowed to intervene. They are expected to listen quietly and thank each participant after his comments.

During this exercise, the moderator ensures that the rules are enforced. He encourages the person speaking by reformulating that person's comments ("If I understand correctly, you are saying that..."). The moderator takes notes in order to discover the real causes of the conflict as well as the participants' common objectives. He puts these goals into perspective and identifies the difficulties to be overcome. Finally, he leads the group in an exchange of ideas where all the suggestions are recorded in order to find solutions to the irritants and problems. When a large majority of the group seems to rally around a good idea, the moderator sees that it is quickly implemented and establishes time frames to monitor the effectiveness of the action taken.

In some cases, it may be necessary to ask everyone involved to commit themselves, either verbally or in writing, to the implementation of the chosen solutions and the attainment of the redefined objectives.

The person who initiates this process must be prepared to see certain members withdraw from the group. All members are entitled to reconsider their role and their desire to participate when real issues are on the table.

What are the main causes of conflict ?



To successfully resolve a conflict or keep a problem from degenerating into conflict, it is important to know its causes, and there can be a great many! We can examine them by dividing them into the following two categories:

- Complications in interpersonal relations
- Irritants caused by certain situations

Getting along with others : It's not always easy !

Personality conflict

Whether within the family or at work, we have to deal with the personalities, characters, and habits of people with whom we would not necessarily choose to associate. Our attention becomes focused on the small things that bother us about a person, to the point that his qualities are obscured. This is when misunderstandings and abrupt reactions can easily spark a crisis.

The communication game

We are all victims, at one time or another, of having our messages or intentions misinterpreted. Unverified perceptions can cause problems in interpersonal relationships.

Many conflicts could be avoided if we listened more attentively and were in less of a hurry to express our own opinions. Often, conflict arises between two people who, in the final analysis, are trying to say the same thing!

Power struggles

Some people cling to their ideas like a dog to a bone. Others have difficulty accepting authority or want at all costs to be given recognition or to take control. When two or three members of the same group react in this way, confrontations are to be expected. Wanting to be right at all costs is already being wrong.

The saviour instinct

This is a widespread problem among well-intentioned people! In fact, the saviour wants to protect the weaker members of the group from those who seem to want to take advantage of them. The one who holds the power is often thought of as the

"We can't solve a problem with the same attitude we had when we created it."

Albert Einstein

The road to hell is paved with good intentions.



aggressor. In no time, members of the group divide into opposing clans, some siding with the "victims" and others taking the leader's side. Both sides denounce the guilty parties. The person who just meant to help becomes the target of all the opponents. Instead of preserving the harmony of the group, his action has sown dissension among the members.

Conflicting values

All adults establish their own value scale that, at a conscious or unconscious level, governs their actions and their decisions. Just as with religious beliefs, political options, or social ideals, a person's values are a sensitive issue that should be treated with a great deal of tolerance and respect. All the arguments in the world can't shake these kinds of convictions. Disputing them just hardens the person's original positions and turns the exchange of opinions into an obstacle to any kind of cooperation. In such cases, there are only two options: avoid the subject or revise the objectives of the group in order to find a common goal that goes beyond individual positions.

Battles over principles

Principles are a set of rules that seem fundamental to those who adhere to them, but that may seem exaggerated or unimportant to others. When people do not share the same principles, conflicts can arise, particularly if the group fails to adopt a clear code of conduct that everyone supports.

Dangerous attitudes and behaviours

Prejudices, presumptions, accusations, criticisms, and closed or rigid attitudes often cause conflicts, and everyone is a loser in these instances.

Jokes with a sexual or racial connotation, insinuations, threats or sulking also endanger the rapport of a group.

By far the most harmful strategies are those that set out to "divide and conquer," to put others down, or to use people's weaknesses to force them to take a certain action. No group can function normally in an atmosphere of manipulation or moral harassment. Though these methods sometimes appear to be effective in the short term, they always end by destroying confidence and motivation, leaving deep scars on those who are victims of these tactics. Consequently, any manipulation of the group must be immediately denounced; it is a matter of fundamental respect for people and the integrity of the person.

Situations that produce stress... and conflict

Major changes

Although some people like change, major upheavals always give rise to a certain resistance. This is normal, because to adapt means to temporarily lose control, which naturally results in insecurity and stress.

By the same token, change can upset expectations, ambitions, and even those things that already seemed to be permanently achieved. In any case, upheaval

CHANGES THAT ARE UPSETTING :

- Restructuring
- Transfers of power
- Difficulties associated with adolescence
- Divorce, death, or the departure of a loved one
- Forced moves
- Disappointments related to promotion, recognition, or acquisitions
- Departure of colleagues and friends

All these situations confirm the saying: "Life is what happens when you're making other plans."

leads to fear. People may become aggressive, make more or less clumsy attempts to maintain the status quo by sabotaging the changes, and twist the truth to protect what is left of power, security, or prestige.

We all have to cope with changes throughout our lives. These are sensitive periods when we need the support of others to find the courage to carry on and accept the change.

For this reason, when a group initiates a change in direction, it is to be expected that members react, sometimes quite bitterly. In such cases, it is useless to try to deny the emotions that arise. They are real to those who feel them. Listening, providing information, and being open are by far the best ways to support people who feel a real, perceived, or anticipated loss. It is also the right time to unite everyone around the fundamental objective; in this way, the change in direction will be perceived as a passage instead of as a threat to action and motivation.

What are the repercussions of a conflict ?



In Chinese, the opposite of "violence" is "strength."

All conflict produces tension, even when the people involved try to hide it. Sooner or later, the disputed subject resurfaces, each time with a little more emotion, until the day when a crisis explodes. Once the inevitable has occurred, provocation and stubbornness act like oil on the flames. To keep a conflict from escalating and find a resolution it is absolutely essential to find a way for all parties to come out winners, convinced that they and their viewpoints have been respected.

No one escapes unharmed from a battle

Everyone involved in a conflict gets hurt, sometimes seriously, even those who seem to have won the battle. In fact, the emotions felt on all sides are very similar. There is a sense of betrayal, feelings of fear, restraint, or abuse, a loss of purpose, repressed anger, frustration, resentment and guilt. In some instances, recognizing this suffering can allow people to reestablish the ties that were broken.

The costs and the benefits of conflicts

Conflict in a group is a paradoxical phenomenon. In fact, in most cases, people come into conflict defending their own ideas of how to achieve the common objective. Yet an unresolved conflict is the greatest possible obstacle to achieving the mission of a group. Nevertheless, when people put their cards on the table, address the real issues, and find a solution to both the conflict and the problems that produced it, the crisis becomes an opportunity to make a new start with a better understanding of the issues, the people, and their shared objectives.

Can conflicts be avoided ?

Detachment is the opposite of indifference. It is the essential condition to a healthy relationship, one without assimilation or confusion.

In an ideal world, conflict would not exist. However, in real life, we have to acknowledge that it is sometimes more dangerous to try to avoid conflict than to face it with courage.

Effective antidotes do exist which neutralize the sources of conflict, such as the following :

- Clear, honest, and effective communication;
- Individual and collective questioning of the motivations for certain behaviours or attitudes so that solutions may be quickly found for the unnecessary irritants and problems related to how the group operates;
- Regular reminders of the shared objective that unites all the members of the group;
- Formulating clear game rules that everyone agrees to and that are designed to facilitate the operations of the group;
- The courage to express one's discomfort or resistance in an acceptable and respectful manner before pent-up emotions explode;
- A good dose of flexibility and concern for consultation;
- A sense of humor that allows one to deal with serious matters without taking oneself too seriously;
- An ability to let go and a certain detachment in order to remain lucid and objective when tensions start to build.

It is essential to make the distinction between the person and the ideas he is defending.

In brief

- Conflict can be the beginning of better understanding within a group on the condition that it produces only winners.
- Conflict resolution depends as much on personal commitment as on the collective process undertaken by all members of a group to respect each individual.

It is essential to make the distinction between the person and the ideas he is defending.

- The operating rules of the group must be clear, known, and approved by everyone, from the very beginning.
- No member of the group should be made a scapegoat for a conflict or be held responsible for the situation.
- The group's objectives should be both the driving force and the rallying point for all of its members.

