

# Break Through Training

## How Conflicts build up and how to resolve them

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Organisational conflict can occur at several levels: between individuals, between groups and between organisations. While we will focus on interpersonal conflict, the principles and ideas discussed here are also valid for inter-group and inter-organisational conflicts.

Conflict typically proceeds through four stages even if each step is not recognised as such. The phases identified by theorist Louis Pondy are as follows:

Phase 1: Latent -- When two or more parties must cooperate with one another in order to achieve a desired objective, there is potential for conflict. Latent conflict is often created whenever change occurs. Examples are a budget cutback, a change in organisational direction, a change in a personal goal or value, a new crisis project added to an already overloaded work force, or an expected occurrence (such as a salary increase) not happening.

Phase 2: Perceived -- This is the point when members are becoming more aware of a problem, even if they are not sure where it comes from. Incompatibility is perceived and tension begins.

Phase 3: Felt -- The parties begin to focus in on differences of opinion and interests, sharpening perceived conflict. Internal tensions and frustrations begin to crystallize around specific, defined issues and people begin to build emotional commitment to their particular position.

Phase 4: Manifest -- The outward display of conflict occurs when the opposing parties plan and follow through with acts to frustrate one another. Conflict is very obvious at this point.

As conflict proceeds through the stages, resolution becomes more difficult. People become more locked into their positions and more convinced that the conflict must be a win or lose situation. The ideal is to recognize conflict early and work for a resolution that is a win for each of the parties.

### *Conflict Resolution Behavior*

There are five basic behaviors that will help you resolve conflict in almost any situation you encounter. They will allow you to benefit from positive disagreement without having those disagreements escalate into out-of-control personality conflicts that damage the morale and productivity of the organization. These basics are:

Openness -- state your feelings and thoughts openly, directly, and honestly without trying to hide or disguise the real object of your disagreement. Don't attribute negative statements about the other person to unknown others. Use I-statements and talk about how you feel and what you want. Focus on current specifics and on identifying the problem.

Empathy -- listen with empathy. Try to understand and feel what the other person is feeling and to see the situation from her point of view. Demonstrate your understanding and validate the other person's feelings. Comments such as "I appreciate how you feel" ... "I understand your feelings" ... "I'm sorry I made you feel that way" ... let the other person know that you are sincere in understanding her views.

Supportiveness -- describe the behaviors you have difficulty with rather than evaluating them. Express your concern for and support of the other person. Let him know you want to find a solution that benefits both of you. State your position tentatively with a willingness to change your opinion if appropriate reasons are given. Be willing to support the other person's position if it makes sense to do so.

Positiveness -- try to identify areas of agreements and emphasise those. Look at the conflict as a way to better understand the entire situation and to possibly find a new and better solution. Be positive about the other person and your relationship. Express your commitment to finding a resolution that works for everyone.

Equality -- treat the other person and his ideas and opinions as equal. Give the person the time and space to completely express his ideas. Evaluate all ideas and positions logically and without regard to ownership.

Conflicts offer many benefits if we can resolve them productively. Healthy disagreement can have a positive, generating effect. As people are forced to work through a problem to its solution, they get a chance to better understand the point of view of others. Successful resolution of small conflicts can diffuse the possibility of more serious conflicts and result in better working relationships.