

# Conflict creation for driving change

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We acknowledge that conflict is endemic in organisational life, and we seem to accept that there is little we can do about it. By looking at conflict from another perspective, we can create a very powerful tool for change. Conflict, its management and resolution, is a critical process that can be used successfully in a micro- or a macro-perspective on organisational change. You can use it to change a whole culture or significantly help individuals to shape their own personal future. At any level, a coach as change agent can use it either individually or, more successfully, with teams of people at all levels. The coach is the ideal person to introduce the process of conflict creation to create a solution focus for implementation of change. This approach outdates the older model of conflict containment.

Conflict is most unwelcome, and usually ignored, in most

businesses. On a personal level, most of us will do almost anything to avoid entering into conflict with others. This is even more true in an organisational context. Generally, we tend to avoid conflict because its consequences may be unpleasant and because we cannot be certain that the outcome will be in our favour. We may also be concerned about whether we can deal with the personal implications of conflict. Most of us would probably agree we are not good at dealing with conflict. It is often viewed as uncomfortable and best avoided.

As human beings, we tend to gravitate towards certainty in our dealings with others, especially in business. It is natural for us to become uncomfortable if conflict that could escalate and, in turn, stir strong emotions arises in connection with particular issues. This is probably one of the situations in which the majority of

us feel ill at ease, and one in which we could benefit most from developing new strategies for resolution in order to move our organisations forward. Instead, too many find it easier just to sit and watch, and to engage in conflict containment. This failure to commit personally holds us back from helping our organisations become much more successful.

Conflict is a natural outcome when we have two differing views or opinions persisting over time. It pervades organisational life. It creates apathy and lethargy and slowly erodes the culture of the organisation. Conflict is a subject that many senior managers avoid debating. In fact, some people have mastered the art of conflict containment and believe that it is the only way to deal with the issue.

For conflict situations that may have severe impacts on the business if not resolved, a solution-focused approach is the answer. For long-standing disputes between several groups, a more robust approach is required. A formal session should be facilitated to give every opportunity for people to work together and explore every vantage point from multiple perspectives. This involves looking at the problem as a stranger would, and incorporating the behavioural components of emotions, motives, agendas and so on as well as strategy and tactics.

**Stage 2 – assess pay-off matrices.** Also assess how the other parties will react to offers and counter offers, ensuring that all options are on the table prior to conflict resolution. This does not reflect formal negotiations, in which bids and counterbids and packages are cleverly disguised so that the outcome of the transaction is the creation of winners and losers. This is an open-book approach that is totally focused on using conflict as a constructive means to reach a solutions focus – in which possibilities are explored and each party is aware of the costs and sacrifices of actions of each party from different viewpoints.

**Stage 3 – develop a collaborative solution.** This requires all constituents to think creatively about their part in concluding a long-term solution and overseeing the implementation of the resolution or change. It involves working together to maximise benefits in the long and short term for all involved.

**Stage 4 – implementation and learning.** Integrating the solution into the day-to-day practices of all the constituents of the process is central to ensuring a long-term

perspective. This is a win-win solution to engaging others and sharing the same mindset with regard to installing any changes required, and ensuring that momentum for implementation is achieved. It is critical that the learning from the process is documented and can be used to agree measures to assess progress. All information can then be used in future if there is a need to re-evaluate and retest the learning achieved.

## Concluding thoughts

Conflict resolution is based upon long-term commitment to winning the commitment and ownership of all who are party to the initial conflict, with the aim of creating a partnership and building a new future. Conflict in an organisation is usually the result of a long-term disagreement which, if unresolved, often turns into a costly feud with winners and losers. Unresolved, these feuds continue and will inflict more hurt to the organisation than was apparent at the outset of the conflict. Without redressing the situation, these situations can seriously impact on the larger organisation and its competitive edge. We have witnessed situations in which there are large power blocks in

organisations that fail to communicate and operate, even though the organisations are under intense pressure from competitors. In some instances, those involved expend more energy on working against each other than in focusing their efforts on beating the competition. The approach to conflict resolution outlined in this module moves beyond simple interpersonal situations to deal with some of the real problems that hold back organisations from achieving their potential.

Conflict creation and resolution is the key to ensuring that the whole organisation is working in unison. Through acknowledging the conflict, its source and the options available to the organisation, it is relatively easy to unite the organisation in one purpose or *raison d'être*.

The purpose of an organisation is to focus on creating a tangible future, achieving goals and using the energies of its people and its resources to accomplish that aim. The simple factor that can stop the flow of the whole process is failing to address the conflict situations that arise between organisational units, and failing to use conflict as a creative force to align all constituencies to face and work in the same direction.

## References

1. Thomas Kilmann *Conflict Mode Instrument*, Xicom, 1974.
2. Conflict Resolution [www.learningstrategies.ltd.uk/learningstrategies1.asp](http://www.learningstrategies.ltd.uk/learningstrategies1.asp)
3. Paul Z Jackson and Mark McKergow, *The Solutions Focus: the Simple Way to Positive Change*, Nicholas Brealey, 2002.

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Most of us in a business setting are concerned about how unresolved conflict does not just affect how people think and how they feel and behave, but also about what the impact of conflict on performance is. We tend to equate conflict situations with unpredictability, and their resolution creates fears of working with others whose heightened emotions make them move away from reasoned debate. Not surprisingly, many people tend to walk in the opposite direction when conflict rears its head. Conflict is often avoided because people do not know how they will respond to the variety of emotions that a situation may generate – especially if that uncertainty is shared across the organisation. If people feel they cannot control the emotions in the situation or the implications generated organisationally, they will

tend to avoid getting involved in resolving the conflict situation at all.

### Conflict is natural and a positive force for change

Today, there is more pressure in business to grow and change quickly than ever before. We have to reinvent our businesses, our visions, our strategies and behaviours, and also ourselves and how we work with others who may have views hostile to our own. Consider this reality against the unassailable fact that, generally speaking, people do not like dealing with conflict, even though it is a fact of organisational life. Sometimes the whole issue of dealing with conflict can be perceived as being just too difficult, too harrowing an experience, or simply a waste of time because it will not work.

### Conflict is a macro-issue

Often, little change will be perceived in coaching teams or individuals unless conflicts are really opened up to full 360-degree scrutiny. We all know that conflict is healthy, natural and endemic within business. However, that does not make it a pleasurable experience in which to participate or facilitate. Make no mistake, conflict management is a huge issue that most organisational change makers – including change agents, coaches and trainers – resist at their peril. Failing to address the difficult issues, or leaving them unresolved within the existing culture, is sabotaging and minimises the impact of positive change in the long term.

What we need to understand and embrace is the belief that conflict is a good and natural consequence of a difference of views. Our role as change makers and coaches is to use it constructively. The key challenge is to win the support of others to use conflict as a positive and natural process for improvement in how we work together, in order to enact the transformation of our businesses.

### Conflict avoidance and containment

One would imagine that conflict management and its acquisition as a core skill would be a key attribute of any change-management situation. It is, however, generally overlooked in reality, and that is reflected in the management literature. From an organisational standpoint, we tend to avoid the reality of conflict. We adopt the rational adult model of working things out. This may appear 'grown up', but it involves ignoring the fact

that when people work together in organisations there is a cocktail of emotions, motivations, beliefs and viewpoints – and often they do not gel into a coherent unity. Instead of letting these forces find their natural state, we often ignore them, believing that we can do little to improve the situation. What we should be doing more frequently is actually exploring the cocktail of conflict as it exists in organisational life.

In practice, change-management situations are not usually governed and managed in a strictly logical-rational manner. In the real world, political and behavioural components and motives cloud the process of change. Personal ambition, mixed motives, irrational beliefs, insecurities, anxiety, raw emotions and political strategies are the dynamics of personal and organisational life. Real change takes place only when conflict resolution is recognised as the process that can direct the mixed motives, the politics, the personal agenda, the conflicting ambitions and goals of people into an arena where agreement and growth can be achieved. Failing to address this issue leaves us impotent as change makers.

### Current thinking

It seems that the literature of conflict management has not moved on much from the Thomas Kilmann model,<sup>1</sup> in which conflict was seen in the context of interpersonal relations. This excellent work enabled managers to assess their desired mode of handling conflict, mostly in one-to-one situations. What is now of interest is looking at how we can use conflict to drive organisational change and improvement. The Thomas Kilmann approach has been an important foundation for the development of a more robust change model. This approach

incorporates much of the research in organisational development, interpersonal skills and negotiation strategy, and elements of Neuro Linguistic Programming, into a conflict model for organisational improvement. The model or process can be used like the Thomas Kilmann model in a micro-setting between individuals and small teams, or in and across multiple organisations of the same entity. This approach is best summed up in the four-stage model or process.

### The four-stage process of conflict creation

The overriding theme is that all change evolves, striving towards a state of continuous improvement. Improvement occurs only after all views and all approaches have been vigorously debated between all constituencies. There are always more innovative, newer ways – and faster, quicker, and cheaper and more effective approaches – to improving an organisation and the processes that support it.

Process focus is critical in this analysis. Everything in management and organisation is a process, and all processes are the result of incorporating the ideas, viewpoints and input of all constituents of that process. It is therefore natural that only by working hard with all constituents (with their varying perspectives) of a process can a consensus be reached. What is important is that the consensus be reached through working through disagreements. This is where most change efforts fail. They avoid the difficult stuff. It is easy to talk about what unites people. It is more important to talk in depth about conflicts – what separates and is the focus of intense disagreement. This differs from the norm in many businesses: of inappropriately applying the LCD or lowest common

denominator as a false yardstick for agreement. There is confusion and a world of difference between taking the average of a variety of views as consensus and seeking to create unity from disagreement. As Dr Ohno, chairman of Toyota, famously stated, 'From the 3 per cent of disagreement comes the 100 per cent of success.'

This 100 per cent of success through creative disagreement, or using conflict constructively, is moving away from the ineffectual win-lose strategy of much of change management. This is fundamental to the process of going towards building a true win-win relationship<sup>2</sup> in problem-solving. This requires the facilitator or change maker to use conflict as a tool to lever points of disagreement in order to create a new solution-focused result.<sup>3</sup> What often keeps people in the old conflict resolution mode, rather than in the conflict creation mode, is a focus on the problem. In this approach there is a complete focus on the solution.

### Stage 1 – scan for understanding.

This requires identification of all constituents of the process. It calls for all those involved in managing the process to assess the options and the benefits of each constituent in that situation. This involves assessment of the least and most preferred strategies and pay-offs for each of the actors or constituents. The Thomas Kilmann model is useful for dealing with minor interpersonal conflicts. Here, concentrating upon preferred styles of dealing with conflict can be useful, but conflict situations in business are often much more serious and are reflected in clashes of cultures within the same organisation. To resolve such clashes, consideration of the divergence and confluence of strategic thinking and acting is needed.