

CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND MEDIATION



**The Skills You Need Guide
to Interpersonal Skills**

PART 3

CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND MEDIATION

Skills You Need

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INTRODUCTION

Not many days seem to go by without some mention of conflict in the news, whether an industrial dispute, or an international disagreement. Of course, not all of us are involved in conflicts, or called upon to mediate in them, at international or even national level. However, conflict resolution and mediation skills can be extremely useful for many people both at work and at home.

- Need to persuade a screaming toddler to get dressed?
- Having an argument with your neighbour about the height of your hedge?
- Children fighting over the television remote control?
- Colleagues locked in a battle over how to run a project?

All these, and many more situations, call for not just tact and diplomacy, but active conflict resolution and mediation skills.

This book introduces the concept of conflict resolution and explains how you can develop the necessary skills. It is designed in particular for those who are new to conflict resolution or mediation and wish to develop their skills, but those with some familiarity with the concepts should also find it useful.



HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

The book is designed as both a guide and workbook. We think that you will get the most out of it if you do the exercises set out in each chapter as you go.

Where there are clear and correct answers to the questions and exercises, these are included at the back of the book. Many of the exercises, however, simply ask you to consider and think about your experience, and develop your views.

You may find it helpful to keep a diary or journal in which you record your thoughts and learning from each exercise. You might also want to note points that you have found particularly interesting or insightful, and there is space at the end of each chapter to do so.

We hope that you enjoy this book and find it useful.

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AN INTRODUCTION TO CONFLICT

Conflict, or more specifically interpersonal conflict, is a fact of life, and particularly of organisational life. It often emerges more when people are stressed, for example, when there are changes on the horizon, or when everyone is under pressure because of a looming deadline.

However, conflict can also arise in relationships and situations outside work.

Handling conflict in ways that lead to increased stress can be detrimental to your health. Poor conflict management can lead to higher production of the stress hormone cortisol, and also cause hardening of the arteries, leading to increased risk of heart attacks, and high blood pressure.

Learning to deal with conflict in a positive and constructive way, without excessive stress, is therefore an important way to improve your well-being as well as your relationships.

WHAT IS CONFLICT?

Conflict is more than just a minor disagreement.

Interpersonal conflict has been defined as:

“AN EXPRESSED STRUGGLE BETWEEN AT LEAST TWO INTERDEPENDENT PARTIES WHO PERCEIVE INCOMPATIBLE GOALS, SCARCE RESOURCES, AND INTERFERENCE FROM THE OTHER PARTY IN ACHIEVING THEIR GOALS.”

Adler, R. B., Rosenfeld, L. B. and Proctor, R. F. Interplay: The Process of Interpersonal Communication (12th edition).

Unpicking this a little, it means that for a disagreement to become a conflict, there needs to be:

- Some element of communication: a shared understanding that there is a disagreement;
- The well-being of the people involved needs to depend on each other in some way. This doesn't mean that they have to have equal power: a manager and subordinate can be equally as interdependent as a married couple;
- The people involved perceive that their goals are incompatible, meaning that they cannot both be met;
- They are competing for resources; and
- Each perceives the other as interfering with the achievement of their goals.



CONFLICT IS NOT ALWAYS A BAD THING

Conflict can be destructive, leading people to develop negative feelings for each other and spend energy on conflict that could be better spent elsewhere. It can also deepen differences and lead groups to polarise into either/or positions.

However, well-managed conflict can also be constructive, helping to 'clear the air', releasing emotion and stress, and resolving tension, especially if those involved use it as an opportunity to increase understanding and find a way forward together out of the conflict situation.

TYPES OF CONFLICT

There are three types of conflict: **personal or relational conflicts**, **instrumental conflicts** and **conflicts of interest**:

- **Personal or relational conflicts** are usually about identity or self-image, or important aspects of a relationship such as loyalty, breach of confidence, perceived betrayal or lack of respect.

For example, if one member of a couple has an affair, this could lead to a personal conflict with the other half of the couple. At work, a relational conflict might arise if someone perceives that they are not being respected by others.

- **Instrumental conflicts** are about goals, structures, procedures and means: something fairly tangible and structural within the organisation or for an individual.

For example, the CEO of a handyman firm might have a fundamental disagreement with his Operations Manager about the direction in which the company should go, and whether it should focus on serving residential or commercial customers.

- **Conflicts of interest** concern the ways in which the means of achieving goals are distributed, such as time, money, space and staff. They may also be about factors related to these, such as relative importance, or knowledge and expertise.

For example, a couple might disagree over whether to spend a bonus on a holiday or to repair the roof.

Before you can resolve a conflict, or even decide on a strategy for resolving it, you need to identify its source and therefore its type.

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is available at**

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