Employee Relations and Wellbeing

Lecture Title:

Conflict Management in the Workplace

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Masters in
Human Resources Management

Learning Objectives

- Identify different types of workplace conflict and their root causes

- Apply conflict resolution models to practical scenarios

- Critically reflect on the role of communication in managing disputes

Group Discussion

-How do you define conflict?

-What can lead to conflict in the workplace?

Definition

Conflict is “a situation in which two or more parties perceive that their interests are incompatible, express hostile attitudes, or take actions that damage the other parties’ ability to pursue their interests” (Deutsch, Coleman & Marcus, 2011, p. 23).

Types of Conflicts in the Workplace

Conflict Type	Definition	Typical Causes	Potential Impact
Task Conflict	Disagreements about work content, processes, or goals.	Differing ideas, methods, or priorities.	Can enhance decision-making if managed.
Relationship Conflict	Personal or emotional clashes between individuals.	Personality differences, tension, lack of trust.	Often damaging to morale and teamwork.
Structural Conflict	Conflict stemming from organizational systems or roles.	Role ambiguity, resource allocation, power dynamics.	May persist unless systemic changes occur.
Interpersonal Conflict	Conflict between individuals based on behaviors or communication styles.	Miscommunication, incompatible work habits, values.	Can escalate quickly if unmanaged.

Common Root Causes of Conflict

- Role ambiguity
- Resource scarcity
- Competing goals or interests
- Ineffective communication
- Value or cultural differences
- Leadership style
- Organizational change or uncertainty

Group Exercise

- Refer to the case studies provided
- Determine the type of conflict (Task, relationship, structural, interpersonal)
- Identify possible root causes

Conflict Scenarios

Scenario	Description
1. Budget Battle	Two department heads disagree over which team should receive a limited portion of the annual budget. Discussions become tense as both push for their priorities.
2. The Silent Treatment	A team member stops communicating openly after being publicly criticized in a meeting. Over time, tension spreads within the group.
3. Whose Job Is It?	A new project is launched, but team members aren't clear on their responsibilities. Overlapping roles cause delays and frustration.
4. Personality Clash	A highly detail-oriented employee finds it difficult to work with a colleague who is spontaneous and informal. They often misinterpret each other's tone and intent.
5. Policy vs. People	A manager enforces a new remote work policy that frustrates employees who feel disconnected and unsupported. Complaints start to rise about team morale.

Conflict Scenarios

Scenario	Primary Conflict Type(s)	Explanation
1. Budget Battle	Task + Structural	Task-based conflict over resource allocation; structural because it's tied to departmental priorities and organizational decision-making.
2. The Silent Treatment	Relationship + Interpersonal	Emotional tension and communication breakdown between individuals.
3. Whose Job Is It?	Structural	Rooted in lack of role clarity and poor organizational design.
4. Personality Clash	Relationship + Interpersonal	Driven by incompatible work styles and personal preferences.
5. Policy vs. People	Structural + Relationship	Policy (systemic) is causing emotional fallout and strained relationships.

Understanding Conflict Dynamics

Conflict is an inevitable part of organizational life. Whether it arises from competing goals, unclear communication, or interpersonal tension, workplace conflict can disrupt collaboration and hinder performance.

Not all conflict is harmful—when understood and managed effectively, it can lead to innovation, stronger relationships, and better decision-making.

Understanding the dynamics of conflict in the workplace will equip individuals with practical tools for resolution and reflection.

Glasl's Model of Conflict Escalation

Glasl (1997) outlines nine stages of conflict escalation, grouped into the following three phases :

Phase 1 (covering stage 1 -3) - Win- Win

Phase 2 (covering stage 4-6) - Win- Lose

Phase 3 (covering stage 7-9) - Lose - Lose

Glasl's Model of Conflict Escalation

Phase	Stage	Description
I. Win–Win	1. Hardening	Disagreement begins; positions are defended but solutions still sought.
	2. Debate / Polemics	Polarization starts; parties argue and try to win others to their side.
	3. Actions, not Words	Trust declines; parties take unilateral actions instead of communicating.

Glasl's Model of Conflict Escalation

Phase	Stage	Description
II. Win–Lose	4. Images & Coalitions	Negative stereotypes form; alliances are built to strengthen positions.
	5. Loss of Face	Parties feel disrespected, humiliated; emotions intensify.
	6. Strategies of Threat	Threats and power moves are used to control or intimidate.

Glasl's Model of Conflict Escalation

Phase	Stage	Description
III. Lose–Lose	7. Limited Destruction	Goals shift to harming the opponent, even at a cost to oneself.
	8. Fragmentation	Systems and relationships start to break down; internal fragmentation occurs.
	9. Together into the Abyss	Total conflict; both parties risk or accept mutual destruction.

Group Discussion

How do power, hierarchy and organizational culture influence conflict?

Power, Hierarchy & Organisational Culture's influence on Conflict.

Factor	How It Influences Conflict	Common Outcomes	Implications for Conflict Management
Power	Unequal access to decision-making or resources can lead to resentment or abuse of authority.	Suppressed conflict, fear of speaking up, passive resistance.	Encourage empowerment, transparency, and checks on authority.
Hierarchy	Rigid structures may limit communication across levels, delaying resolution.	Bottlenecks, unresolved tensions, top-down blame culture.	Promote open-door policies, flatten hierarchies where appropriate.
Organizational Culture	Cultural norms (e.g., conflict-avoidance or competitiveness) shape how people express or suppress conflict.	Avoidance, escalation, or normalization of toxic behaviors.	Foster a culture of psychological safety and constructive dialogue.

Conflict Progression Stages

Stage	Description	Examples
1. Trigger Event	The initial incident or situation that sparks tension or disagreement.	A critical email, a policy change, a missed deadline.
2. Key Turning Points	Moments when the conflict deepens, positions harden, or emotional responses intensify.	Public confrontation, silence, defensiveness, escalation to leadership.
3. Signs of Escalation	Observable behaviors indicating the conflict is intensifying.	Avoidance, passive-aggression, emotional outbursts, team division.
4. Missed Opportunities	Points where early intervention or better communication could have de-escalated the conflict.	Ignored feedback, failure to mediate, no clarification of roles or intent.

Group Exercise

-Refer to the scenario assigned.

-Map out the conflict progression using the four stages:

.Trigger Event

.Key Turning Points

.Signs of Escalation

.Missed Opportunities to De-escalate (Identify possible missed opportunities)

- Discuss how external factors (Role of leadership, communication barriers, cultural or structural issues) affect conflict progression or resolution.

Conflict Progression Map

Scenario 1: “Email Fallout”

A team leader sends an email to the entire department criticizing a team member’s missed deadline. The tone is formal but publicly points out the error. The team member feels humiliated.

As a result:

-The team member responds curtly in a reply-all email.

- Team morale drops as others feel anxious about public shaming.

- Communication is reduced between team members and the leader.

-Side conversations and complaints increase.

Conflict Progression Map

Scenario 2: “The Newcomer’s Pushback”

A newly hired team member suggests process improvements that require changing existing workflow in their first week. A long-standing employee takes offense, seeing it as disrespectful to how things are done.

As a result:

- Senior employee publicly criticizes the idea in a team meeting.
- The new hire stops sharing input and avoids discussions.
- Tension during meetings increases.
- Other team members begin to take sides.

Conflict Progression Map

“Resource Tug-of-War”

Two departments need access to the same limited software license. Department A claims priority due to project deadlines, while Department B believes they were promised access earlier leading to conflict over allocation of a shared resource.
As a result:

- A manager escalates the issue to senior leadership.
- Department B retaliates by delaying cross-functional support.
- Breakdown of inter-departmental communication.
- Passive resistance and missed deadlines.

Conflict Progression Map

Scenario 4: “Cultural Disconnect”

An international team includes members from cultures with different norms for communication. A team member from a direct-communication culture is perceived as aggressive by others because he gave blunt feedback in a project review meeting.

As a result:

-A teammate confronts the person in a private message, escalating tension.
-Team begins excluding the "blunt" member from informal chats.
-Silence or disengagement in meetings increases.
- Misinterpretation of intentions becomes common.

Conflict Resolution Models

Thomas-Kilman Conflict Mode Instrument

The **Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI)** is based on two key dimensions of behavior in conflict situations:

- **Assertiveness** – the extent to which a person tries to satisfy their own concerns
- **Cooperativeness** – the extent to which a person tries to satisfy the other person's concerns

By combining these dimensions, the model identifies **five conflict-handling styles**:
-Competing,
-Collaborating
-Compromising,
-Avoiding,
-Accommodating.

Each style reflects a different approach to managing conflict, and their effectiveness depends on the situation.

Thomas-Kilman Conflict Mode Instrument

Conflict Style	Assertiveness	Cooperativeness	Description
Competing	High	Low	Pursuing own goals at the other's expense; "win-lose" approach
Collaborating	High	High	Seeking win-win solutions; working together to meet both needs
Compromising	Moderate	Moderate	Finding middle ground; both parties give up something
Avoiding	Low	Low	Ignoring or withdrawing from conflict; postponing
Accommodating	Low	High	Yielding to others; prioritizing the relationship over own needs

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Exercise

-Refer to Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument

- List when it is best to use each style

- List potential pitfalls for each style

Thomas-Kilman Conflict Mode Instrument

Conflict Style	Assertiveness	Cooperativeness	Description	When to Use	Potential Pitfalls
Competing	High	Low	Pursuing own goals at the other's expense; "win-lose" approach	Emergencies; enforcing unpopular decisions; defending rights	Can damage relationships; may escalate conflict
Collaborating	High	High	Seeking win-win solutions; working together to meet both needs		
Compromising	Moderate	Moderate	Finding middle ground; both parties give up something		
Avoiding	Low	Low	Ignoring or withdrawing from conflict; postponing		
Accommodating	Low	High	Yielding to others; prioritizing the relationship over own needs		

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Collaborating	High	High	Seeking win-win solutions; working together to meet both needs	Complex issues; long-term relationships; innovation	Time-consuming; requires trust and open communication
Compromising	Moderate	Moderate	Finding middle ground; both parties give up something	Temporary solutions; when time is limited; balanced power	May produce suboptimal outcomes; can be seen as avoidance
Avoiding	Low	Low	Ignoring or withdrawing from conflict; postponing	Trivial issues; when emotions are high; lack of information	Unresolved issues may fester; perceived as passive
Accommodating	Low	High	Yielding to others; prioritizing the relationship over own needs	Preserving harmony; when issue matters more to others	Own needs go unmet; may build resentment over time

Interest-Based Relational (IBR) Approach

The IBR Approach was developed by Roger Fisher and William Ury, based on their work in negotiation and conflict resolution (notably in Getting to Yes).

It emphasizes maintaining positive relationships while resolving the underlying interests that give rise to conflict.

Rather than focusing on positions (what people say they want), the IBR method digs deeper into interests (why they want it) and promotes collaboration and empathy

Interest-Based Relational (IBR) Approach

Principle	Explanation
1. Separate the people from the problem	Don't let personal feelings or miscommunication escalate the issue. Focus on the issue, not the person.
2. Focus on interests, not positions	Understand the underlying needs, fears, concerns, or desires that drive people's demands.
3. Generate options for mutual gain	Brainstorm creative solutions that can satisfy both parties' interests. Aim for win-win outcomes.
4. Use objective criteria	Base decisions on fair standards (e.g., company policy, law, data), not power or pressure.
5. Build relationships with mutual respect	Respect others' perspectives and maintain open, honest communication throughout.

Applying the IBR Approach:

Set	Clarify	Identify and Explore	Generate	Agree on
Set the Scene • Choose a neutral, private space. • Establish ground rules: mutual respect, no interruptions, shared goal of resolution.	Clarify Perceptions • Let each party explain their perspective without interruption. • Summarize what you've heard to ensure understanding.	**Identify and Explore Interests** • **Ask open-ended questions to go beyond surface demands.** • **Use techniques like "Why is this important to you?"**	**Generate Options** • **Collaboratively brainstorm solutions without judging.** • **Encourage creativity and multiple alternatives.**	**Agree on Action** • **Choose a solution that best satisfies shared interests.** • **Create clear, realistic steps and responsibilities.**

Benefits of the IBR Approach

- Promotes long-term trust and collaboration
- Encourages emotional intelligence and empathy
- Avoids escalation and minimizes defensiveness
- Produces sustainable, interest-aligned solutions

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