

CONFRONTING CONFLICT

A first-aid kit for handling conflict

Friedrich Glasl



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1. Help – Conflict!

This book came about in response to numerous requests for help. As a conflict consultant I have observed a steady increase in disagreements, tensions and friction in a variety of settings and situations.

In business the pace of things has become faster and faster: products become obsolete more quickly and have to be replaced by new ones. The speed of product development means there is not enough time to test new ideas thoroughly and look at their impact, so discussion of these issues is intense, but rushed and superficial. This places many people under severe stress, which they take into their work and their families.

In politics and business new problems emerge and become intertwined: business profits and shares soar, but unemployment rises at the same time. Classic economic concepts are no longer effective in the same way as before, and this results in bitter disagreements which call traditional party political frameworks into question. This triggers confrontations between fundamentalists and realists within all parties.

Many people have come to question the conventional roles of men and women within the family and society, and as a result of various factors these roles are changing. There are winners and losers in this process, and the losers put up a fight to try to maintain old values.

Many large companies are merging with former competitors and force their staff to work with and trust their former ‘enemies’ immediately. In practice this leads to situations in which the differences between previous organizational cultures are emphasized, rather than the desired new common culture. This results in rivalries and exclusions.

Because of lower pupil numbers, schools now have to consider what they are about, for the first time encountering all kinds of differences between people’s views of the nature of the human being,

and in their practical approaches to teaching. Head teachers believe they need to impose a school philosophy in order to prevent their school stagnating in endless debates. Yet this authoritarian approach is the very reason why relationships amongst teachers, and between teachers and parents erupt into conflict.

Within the larger social context there are more and more violent clashes. So-called 'ethnic cleansing' in former Yugoslavia leads to atrocities and civil war. The tensions between Greek and Turkish Cypriots are periodically 'set alight' by politicians. In Northern Ireland there has been conflict between Protestants and Catholics for many years. Terrorist activity in Israel and Palestine, in Algeria and many other countries all over the world, only serves to make any solution of fundamental political problems seem even more remote. Anarchy, or the mafia, rule in some of the former communist countries in Eastern Europe.

In these and other such situations I have noticed that large numbers of people are helpless when it comes to conflict, and that most organizations are insufficiently equipped to handle conflict constructively. Company managers get involved in intense controversies about their strategy for the coming years – yet discussions are often suspended at the very point when real differences of opinion emerge. People don't know how to deal with this: 'It would take too long for everyone to reach agreement,' they say. As a result, those who don't support the views of the ones with power are pushed out of the organization or marginalized.

In politics, it is increasingly rare these days to see a single party with a clear majority, so there is 'horse-trading' and compromise. All this leads to a so-called 'minimum consensus', i.e. people agree to a minimum programme because there are so many reservations on all sides. Everything gets watered down to the lowest common denominator. And once the government's programme is drawn up, its implementation fails because it meets with massive resistance from those charged with putting it into practice. Each side blames the other for half-hearted measures and slow implementation. Reforms become 'stuck', thus causing more problems than they solve.

In schools people become ill and demotivated because of unresolved conflict. If difficulties are discussed in a staff meeting they often keep quiet because they don't want to get involved in more working groups, over and above their exhausting teaching work. But informal conversations tend to focus exclusively on complaints about certain colleagues who have got into difficulties with children and parents. Direct confrontations with 'problem colleagues' are avoided because everyone thinks they already have enough to worry about and deal with.

People often think that it is easier to ignore differences and swallow their anger instead of addressing issues. Often they worry that open discussion of controversies might end up destroying any goodwill that remains. Or they think, wrongly, that openly discussing differences shows lack of consideration for other people's feelings.

1.1 Conflict capability and conflict resistance

The coming decades will see great economic, political and cultural changes, and these will lead to greater problems, perhaps even violence. Because of this I am concerned that our society may develop in a fatal direction,¹ unless political and economic measures are complemented by concerted efforts to overcome our helplessness in dealing with conflict. Many experts can make a contribution in this area. However, even a whole army of professional conflict consultants or mediators would not be equal to this task. A better solution, therefore, is to help people develop their social skills so as to enable them to deal with conflict situations themselves, as far as possible. More profound conflict may ultimately require professional help, but in many cases the situation need not escalate to such an extent. This is a self-help book, intended as an aid to dealing with interpersonal tensions at work. It is a sort of 'first-aid kit' for conflict. Of course, a first-aid kit cannot replace medical advice where this becomes necessary – it may occasionally save a life, but is primarily intended to give instant help when symptoms emerge or when an accident happens.

The concepts and methods described in this book can help you to improve your conflict ‘capability’. If you are involved in a conflict situation, the ‘practice theories’ and exercises outlined in the following chapters will help you to recognise conflict early and to fully understand the situation you are in. The concepts are like maps, helping you to find your bearings, to determine your own position on difficult terrain, as well as keeping an overview. The exercises and techniques are designed to enable you to deal with conflict in groups – at your place of work and in organizations such as councils, schools, church groups, hospitals, universities and so on. You can improve your conflict capability by carefully trying out the methods offered here.

What I mean by conflict capability is the following:

- recognizing signs of conflict in yourself and in your environment as early and as clearly as possible;
- understanding the mechanisms that intensify and entangle conflict situations;
- being able to use various methods for expressing your own position without worsening the situation substantially;
- knowing and being able to use techniques that can help to clarify positions and situations;
- recognizing the limits of your knowledge and skills; knowing when professional help is needed.

Once people become more ‘conflict-capable’, they can make the organizations in which they are involved more ‘conflict-resistant’. I see a ‘conflict-resistant’ organization as being able to deal with differences, friction and tensions constructively. It is not rattled by tensions; it doesn’t grind to a halt in the face of occasional resistance to taking decisions. Nowadays machines and equipment are sometimes described as being fault-resistant: shock-proof, scratch-proof, water-proof, screened against magnetic or electronic influences. If a problem does occur, this equipment is supposed to be easy to get going again. But this is exactly where many organizations have a problem: they thrive while the ‘sun shines’, but if it gets a little too hot, cold or wet, they have difficulties; if it gets stormy or thundery, they collapse.

1.2 Conflict avoidance versus belligerence – two extremes

There are often two very different, extremely one-sided attitudes towards conflict: individuals either *avoid conflict* or are particularly *belligerent*. Where these attitudes are shared by many people in a group, the first leads to an organizational culture in which conflict is avoided and suppressed, which in turn leads to paralysis and a loss of enjoyment, creativity and vitality; the second attitude leads to a situation in which people fight about everything and with everybody, until all common ground is destroyed (Figure 1.1).

	Conflict avoidance	Belligerence
<i>Personal attitude</i>	Retreat, escape, defensiveness; fear of disagreements; anger and emotions are suppressed; differences are hidden from the public eye	Offensive approach, aggression; enjoyment of friction; personal emotions are lived out and clearly shown; differences are fought out in public
<i>Organizational culture</i>	Mostly formal interaction; structures and methods encourage distance; power (attached to position, norms, methods ...) is the main emphasis	Mostly informal interaction; structures and methods encourage confrontation; personal power (conviction, ability, strength, emotionality ...) is played out openly
<i>Effect in the group</i>	‘Cold conflicts’; all energy is paralysed; static and cumbersome; death through paralysis	‘Hot conflicts’; hectic and overly dynamic; unsteady and superficial; disintegration through anarchy

Figure 1.1: Extreme personal attitudes in conflict situations and organizational cultures

Neither of these attitudes enables people to handle differences, tensions and conflict constructively. In the long term every rigidly held, one-sided attitude leads to disaster.

At a first glance this presents an insoluble dilemma. No matter which attitude you decide to take, the result seems to be negative! However, I do not look at conflict in a fatalistic way; I am only pointing out that *both attitudes are one-sided* and that something else is required. If each attitude reinforces its one-sidedness, it can lead to the downfall of a group. Whether things get that far is always determined by those involved!

This is why I place a third attitude in between the two extremes: in relation to people I advocate a 'personal conflict capability', and with regard to organizations I suggest there is a need for conflict resistance as a basic principle. First I am going to look in more detail at the two extreme personal attitudes and will point out their opposing behavioural tendencies (Figure 1.2).

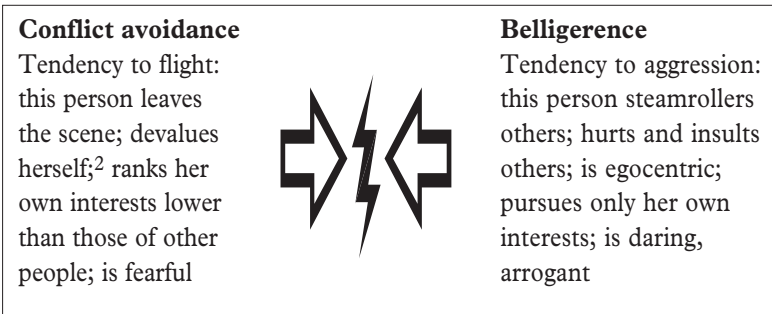


Figure 1.2: Two extreme basic attitudes towards conflict

Both attitudes are generally rooted in certain fears:³

- People who *avoid conflict* are afraid that they might come across as unfeeling, cold and inhuman if they behave in an aggressive manner; they worry that they might rebuff, hurt and destroy others, or that they might get hurt themselves. For this reason they avoid harsh confrontation, suppress their feelings and retreat into isolation.

- On the other hand, *belligerent people* are afraid that they might deny themselves if they are too accommodating; they hate to be considered cowardly or insecure; therefore they show their emotions, act offensively and prefer to suffer or inflict pain rather than leave the scene.

If you make yourself aware of these fears, they can't control you from your subconscious. Knowing about these fears is a prerequisite for the *third attitude, assertiveness* in conflict situations.⁴ This attitude is based on the assumption that all the various people involved in a conflict situation have an equal basic right to exist and therefore the right to their own viewpoints.

Before going into these fears and ways of overcoming them, I will first discuss in more depth the *basic assumptions* behind conflict avoidance, conflict capability and belligerence (Figure 1.3).

<i>Conflict avoidance</i>	Conflict capability	<i>Belligerence</i>
Conflict drains energy, therefore: keep away from it!	Aggressions are energy: I will channel them in positive ways!	Conflict allows me to experience my own being – it increases my vitality!
Open conflict brings unnecessary destruction!	Conflict helps to get away from outdated patterns!	Only chaos will give rise to the new!
Conflict only deepens opposites; differences are basically insoluble!	Differences are vitally necessary; working out differences benefits everyone!	Consensus is often an illusion because: 'War is the father of all things!'

Figure 1.3: The basic assumptions behind conflict avoidance, conflict capability and belligerence

Views of the positive and negative effects of conflict, about opportunities and risks, are linked to these and other assumptions.⁵ This also means that they are linked to hopes and fears.

Whether the optimistic or the pessimistic side is stronger depends on the personality and life experiences of an individual; in addition, influences from the religion, ideology, philosophy and culture of a society will also have a formative influence. The most important points about views of the benefits or disadvantages of conflicts can be summarized as shown in Figure 1.4.

<i>In the following situation ...</i>	<i>... the benefit could be:</i>	<i>... there is a danger that:</i>
1. There are diffuse viewpoints in the organization	At last people will take clear positions	Exaggerated and rigid stances might form
2. People don't take clear positions when there are disagreements	Individuals become clearly visible and noticeable	People show extreme and fanatical characteristics
3. Life in the group is grey and lifeless	There are intense emotions, energy is released	Emotions predominate and lead to a lack of objectivity
4. Existing structures are rigid and obstructive	Rigid forms are radically resolved	All form is destroyed, only chaos and anarchy remain
5. Old patterns of thinking are deeply embedded	Old principles and habits are questioned	Total insecurity arises, there is nothing to hold on to
6. Existing power structures suppress	The balance of power changes, innovation is possible	Power and counter-power destroy one another

Figure 1.4: Views of the functions of conflicts, and of their benefits and disadvantages

Figure 1.4 shows that useful or damaging functions depend on two things: firstly on the situation a group is in before the conflict, and secondly on the degree to which an attitude is assumed to exist. It would therefore be a dangerous generalization to say that conflict always clarifies different stances or that it always strengthens a group, or whatever. In situations 1 to 3 a shapeless group would benefit from disagreement; however, if a group is already characterized by strong stances and individualism, then a disagreement will deepen these. However, if situations such as 4 to 6 occur in groups with problematic rigidities, the effects of opposition can be useful and lead to a loosening, opening and an increase in flexibility; but in extreme cases they can also lead to anarchy and power games.

Positive and negative effects arise from the tensions between two poles:

- When each of the poles operates on its own and particularly strongly, destructive imbalances arise.
- Even if a certain method had a helpful effect at first, it will create new problems if it is taken to an extreme.
- What may be a problem in one situation can offer the solution to a problem in another situation.
- Every method that is good in itself can have exaggerated and perverting effects if used excessively.

In this way exaggerating the good will lead to evil! This can be illustrated with two examples:

1) A departmental manager's concern for her staff provides support for these people and is therefore a good thing; however, if this concern is exaggerated, it becomes a way of control. If there is insufficient concern, the manager abandons her staff.

2) If an older teacher passes on her teaching experience to a younger colleague, the latter may have fewer difficulties. However, if the experienced person contributes her own wisdom at every opportunity, without being asked to do so, the young person will feel preached at and will be hindered in her development. But if there is too little help, the young teacher will feel abandoned.

1.3 Developing assertiveness

Uncovering the subconscious fears behind your basic attitudes can help you to determine where you are coming from (Figure 1.5).

‘Anne’ should do this exercise together with ‘Ben’, a person whom she trusts. Anne and Ben start off by using Questions 1 to 4 in relation to Anne.

1. Consider Anne’s basic attitude in relation to conflict: does she tend towards *conflict avoidance* or towards *belligerence*? Make brief notes on how people who know her well would describe her basic attitude: ‘Anne tends to act in the following ways: ... Anne tries to avoid ...’

2. Now imagine Anne substantially intensifying her usual attitude towards conflict:

- How would somebody who likes Anne describe the potential benefits of the intensification for Anne herself? ‘By intensifying her attitude, Anne would benefit in that she ...’
- What might be the benefit of an intensification of Anne’s previous attitude for her group? How would the group describe this? ‘We would benefit in that ...’

3. Now imagine Anne assuming an attitude that is clearly the opposite of her usual approach:

- Again, how would a good friend describe the disadvantages this might bring for Anne? ‘Anne is probably worried about ...’
- How would somebody from Anne’s group describe the potential disadvantages for the group? ‘We could suffer in that ...’

4. Anne compares her experiences with that of her trusted partner Ben and considers the differences between her own and other people’s views of the potential benefits and disadvantages. Anne closely questions Ben on any aspects where his assessment of the effects differs substantially from her own.

5. Now that Ben has helped Anne with Questions 1 to 4, Anne does the same for Ben. She assesses him in relation to Questions 1 to 4 and Ben does his own assessment on all the questions. The conversation again covers Steps 1 to 4.

Figure 1.5: Fears behind the basic attitudes to conflict

In order to develop *assertiveness*, I recommend that people repeatedly and critically check their own ideas about the benefits and disadvantages. In my experience most people who *avoid conflict* clearly *overestimate* the potential *disadvantages* of a more direct and openly confrontative approach, and *belligerent people* drastically *underestimate* the destructive effects of unrestrained attacks. One's own perception of the effect of basic attitudes differs greatly from other people's perceptions. When you have carried out the exercise in Figure 1.5 with a trusted partner, you should give serious attention to any substantial discrepancies in perception and use them for checking your own basic attitudes.

The next exercise, 'The art of more considerate confrontation', is intended to clarify the basis of these perceptions. To do this, Anthony needs Bridget to act as an observer and Ken to be his partner for the confrontation. It would be useful to have several more observers.

The exercise on considerate confrontation consists of three main phases:

- Phase I: Killer confrontation (Steps 1–5) – Figure 1.6
- Phase II: Avoidance (Steps 6–8) – Figure 1.7
- Phase III: Balanced, considerate confrontation (Steps 9–11) – Figure 1.8

The three phases will take from 45 minutes to an hour to work through, so it is a good idea to take a break between the phases.

If this exercise is successful, Anthony will recognize to what extent his own – mostly unchecked – catastrophic fantasies prevented him from standing up for himself. In Step 5 of Phase I the positive feedback to Anthony is important. He needs to know

Phase I: Killer confrontation

1. Anthony should think of someone to whom he has long wanted to tell what he finds annoying about him, and what he thinks of him. Anthony chooses Peter, his manager. He briefly explains to Ken who Peter is and how he usually talks to him. No further information is needed.
2. Anthony prepares for his 'killer' role for a few minutes, thinking about what he wants to tell his boss, Peter. He should be as rude, inconsiderate, aggressive and insulting as possible and must not allow 'Peter' to divert him from what he wants to say.
3. Ken prepares to play the role of 'Peter' and to offer as much resistance in the confrontation as possible. Ken thinks about ways in which he could most effectively divert Anthony from the confrontation: through threats or flattery, through evasion or attack. If he knows Anthony well, he will probably have a good idea about how he can 'soften him up'.
4. Anthony conducts his killer confrontation, with 'Peter' (played by Ken) trying to divert him from the confrontation. Bridget carefully watches Anthony's behaviour. The conversation is stopped after about 10 minutes.
5. Bridget (as well as any other observers) and Ken (in the role of 'Peter') feed back their observations. Where did Anthony succeed completely, where partially? Where did he stick to his intentions? Where did Ken try to use his tactics? How did they perceive the insulting effects of Anthony's unrestrainedly aggressive behaviour? Was the extent of the damage as great as Anthony had feared? Of course Anthony also feeds back how he felt about the confrontation, which of Ken's tricks he saw through etc.

Figure 1.6: Confrontation – Phase I⁶

where he remained firm – even if he was only making inconsiderate remarks at this point. It is very important to reflect back to Anthony exactly how his behaviour affected other people: he may have thought he was using extremely hurtful and insulting language, whereas the others may have thought that he was standing up for himself for the first time.

Phase II: Avoidance

6. Bridget now prepares for a conversation with Ken (in the role of ‘Peter’) in which she will exaggerate somewhat Anthony’s usual attitude of conflict avoidance. Bridget (as Anthony) acts this out and Ken, in the role of the boss, will be difficult and try to intensify Anthony’s urge for avoidance.
7. Bridget (as Anthony) and Ken (as Peter) conduct a conversation; Anthony observes.
8. Anthony, Bridget and Ken discuss the effects of this conversation.

Figure 1.7: Considerate confrontation – Phase II⁷

In Phase II Anthony is confronted with a caricature of himself. Bridget should not hesitate to exaggerate her behaviour, but she should not become absurd. If she exaggerates too much, Anthony would not deal with this image of himself and Phase III would not achieve the desired effect.

People who avoid conflict tend to perceive the slightest signals given out by their opponent and to consider them far more important than they are meant to be. Thus they lose the energy behind their actions. They become *overly cautious*, because they continually *see an exaggerated version* of the potential negative consequences of their actions. *Belligerent people* proceed completely differently: they are *inconsiderate* because they are completely wrapped up in their actions and therefore their *ability to perceive and receive feedback* is severely restricted. They blank out their perceptions so that

the opponent can't soften them up, as expressed in the phrases 'Looking neither to left nor right', and 'Being hell-bent on getting your own way'.

Phase III: Balanced, considerate confrontation

9. Finally Anthony prepares ways of conducting a conversation with Peter in which killer behaviour and avoidance behaviour are balanced.
10. Anthony conducts the conversation, with Ken ('Peter') once again trying to make things difficult; Bridget observes.
11. Afterwards the balanced, considerate confrontation is assessed: What worked? Where did tendencies towards avoidance or aggression become apparent?

Figure 1.8: Considerate confrontation – Phase III⁸

The art of 'considerate confrontation' is an important element in conflict capability. I use the term 'considerate' to mean that I don't shut my eyes and ears against my opponent, but at the same time I clearly stand up for my own viewpoint. I can show my consideration by frequently feeding back to my opponent what I have heard or seen from her.

This ability to *act and perceive at the same time* can be practised in a further exercise (Figure 1.9), which I have called 'Duet speaking'. Anthony once again needs Bridget's help for this exercise.

The aim of the exercise 'Duet speaking' is to combine standing up for a particular viewpoint with perceptiveness towards the opposing party, according to the idea of 'considerate confrontation'.

1. Anthony and Bridget agree on a straightforward current issue on which they will assume opposing viewpoints. Then they stand facing each other.

2. For the next three minutes Anthony and Bridget talk *simultaneously*. So while Bridget advances her arguments, Anthony gives his viewpoint as well.
3. Whilst Anthony and Bridget are talking, both also have to listen to the opponent's arguments; but they must never stop talking and must not allow themselves to be dissuaded from their viewpoint. At the same time they must also observe the mood, facial expression, gestures and body language of their opponent.
4. After three minutes the conversation is interrupted and both report what they heard and saw from the other person and what they understood of the content of what was said. In particular they should find out what they didn't hear or see.
5. Anthony and Bridget feed back to each other (one at a time!) how they experienced the exercise.

Figure 1.9: Duet speaking

At first glance this exercise does not appear to be aimed at considerate behaviour: initially the aim is not to allow yourself to be dissuaded from your own arguments. But as you have to open all your senses and perceive your opponent at the same time, the exercise is practice in *perceptive action*. As a next step you can practise having a controversial discussion and, while you are talking, continually confirm what arguments you heard from your opponent and what you perceived of her state of mind.

These exercises are intended to lead the one-sided basic attitudes of conflict avoidance and belligerence away from their *extreme* positions. Both attitudes contain valuable components, but these have destructive effects if they are taken to extremes. In exercises and experiments it is easier to see that the two diametrically opposed attitudes of conflict avoidance and belligerence can be reconciled in the attitudes of *assertiveness* and *considerate confrontation* in such a way that the positive elements

from both extremes can be combined to beneficial effect. In this way differences can be handled creatively and constructively so that they do not turn into conflicts.

A lot has already been said about differences and conflicts, but what exactly are differences? What are social conflicts? ('Social' in this context is taken to mean conflicts between two or more people, i.e. in couples, in groups or between groups, in larger communities and large social structures. By contrast *inner conflicts* concern one individual who is at odds with herself.)

1.4 What is meant by social conflicts?

For practical and theoretical reasons I make a distinction between 'social conflicts' and 'differences'. All social conflicts are based on differences – but not all differences are automatically conflicts. Conflict only arises when further elements are added.

It's the most natural thing in the world to experience differences. It is likely that I have differences with the vast majority of humankind (Figure 1.10):

- (1) we perceive most things differently; our understanding, ideas and thoughts differ fundamentally;
- (2) our feelings and emotions are not the same;
- (3) our wills pull us in different directions.

We experience differences with almost everybody – and on all the psychological levels shown in Figure 1.10 – (1), (2) and (3). And yet we don't live in (social) conflict with all these people. Having differences with somebody does not mean that we have a conflict with that person. Defining conflict as widely as this would be completely pointless.

In nature, moreover, differences, opposites and incompatibilities are basic prerequisites for life and development in themselves:

- A female egg and a male sperm are necessary for procreation and life.
- The tension between acids and bases is the secret of the digestive system.
- Breathing in and breathing out must alternate continuously.

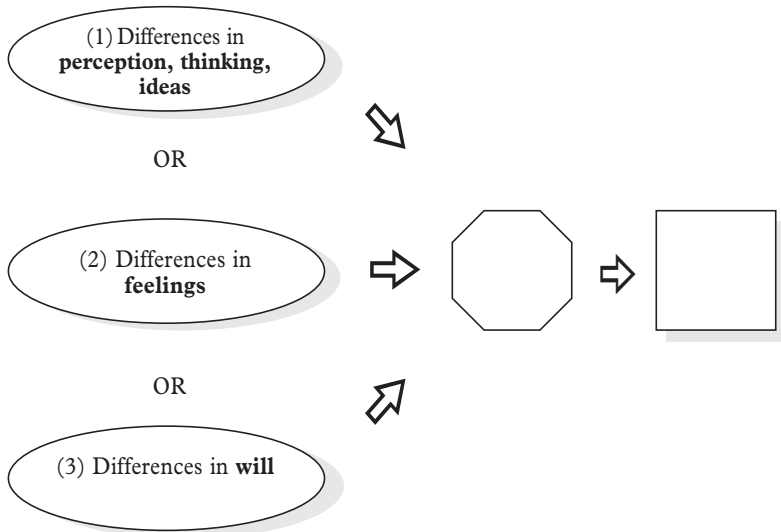


Figure 1.10: The personal factors of a social conflict: differences on three levels⁹

- Birth and death are both necessary aspects of natural life.
- Calm and movement, sleeping and waking, summer and winter, day and night etc. are conditions of life in organic nature.
- The negative and the positive pole in magnetism and electricity, as well as gravity and levitation, are basic forces in the physical world.
- In the psychological arena, too, the polarities of joy and pain, of tension and relaxation, of sympathy and antipathy, of connecting and separating are basic facts which make feelings and emotions possible.

So the existence of differences is not the problem, as differences in themselves do not constitute conflict between people. What is important is how people handle their differences and how they experience them.

I understand a social conflict as a situation where at least one ‘agent’ (one party, i.e. one person, group etc.) experiences a difference in such a way that the actions of another ‘agent’ restrict the way in which she lives out or realizes her own ideas, feelings or intentions. As Figure 1.11 shows, actions and perceived effects are added to the differences in (1) perception, ideas and thinking – and/or the differences in (2) feelings – and/or the differences in (3) will.

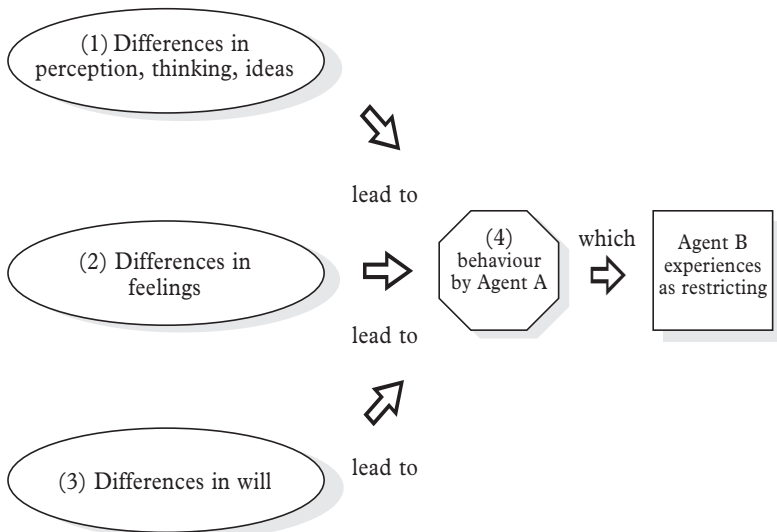


Figure 1.11: Defining elements of a social conflict¹⁰

It is this interaction of perceived differences in another person’s behaviour (group, organization etc.), perceived as restrictive, that is meant by the definition of a social conflict:

Social conflict is an interaction

- between agents (individuals, groups, organizations etc.),
- where at least one agent
- perceives incompatibilities between her thinking/ideas/perceptions

and/or feelings

and/or will

- *and that of the other agent (or agents), and*
- *feels restricted by the other's action*¹¹

For example, if the agents are two colleagues, Anthony and Ben, they don't first need to agree that they see, feel or want different things; it is enough if *at least* one of the colleagues perceives *the differences and the consequences of actions* in this way. As soon as Anthony and/or Ben perceives this, a number of elements come into play which negatively affect the interaction between the two. This is because Elements 1, 2, 3 and 4, given above to explain my definition of conflict (Figure 1.11), are the most important personal factors in every human encounter. As soon as Anthony, a teacher, thinks that his colleague Ben prevents him from realizing his ideas about modern teaching methods, there is a conflict between him and Ben. Because of this there will soon be a change in the way in which Anthony and Ben perceive each other (1), what they feel about each other (2), what they want from each other (3) and what they do to each other, by word or deed (4). In the following section I will describe only the most important changes in these factors (1) to (4).¹²

1.5 Changes in personal factors: simultaneous cause and effect

(1) Changes in perception, ideas and thinking:

In conflicts, perception is increasingly impaired, so that the people involved in the conflict arrive at different views of reality.

Different views in turn lead to more aggression; this increases the differences in perception, intensifies the anger even more and provides the stimuli for further attacks. Overall the following changes will occur in the participants – largely or completely unnoticed by them:

- Their attention becomes selective, i.e. some things are seen more clearly, others not at all.

- Threats are perceived more clearly – other things are overlooked.
- Annoying and irritating characteristics of the opponent are noticed, good traits are overlooked or belittled.
- There is an impairment of the perception of time (so-called ‘cognitive short-sightedness’) which means that the medium- and long-term consequences of one’s own actions increasingly fade from consciousness.
- Events are perceived in a twisted, and often distorted way, so that in remembering a reversal of the chronological order can occur.
- Multifaceted and complex things or events are only perceived in a simplified way.
- People only see what they want to see, and what corresponds to their own opinion and their ingrained patterns of thinking, i.e. existing prejudices appear to be confirmed and become more rigid.

Generalizations occur in people’s thinking. Polarized views and ideas arise. The problem is not only the fact that perceptions are largely falsified, muddled and distorted, but also that these images become increasingly rigid and embedded, and are difficult to change. Over time the images the opponents have created of each other increasingly come between them, *obstructing the view of the real person*.

The consequence of these insights is that you must not consider what you perceive as necessarily true. And when your opponent confronts you with stories that contradict your own perception, then usually she is not consciously lying or distorting things but subconsciously perceiving things differently – and this applies to you as well as the other! Practical help on this is given particularly in Chapter 3, and also in Chapter 7 and 8.

(2) Changes in feelings

Initially people will become more touchy, which increases insecurity and mistrust; later they will assume an armour of insensitivity. Once the disagreement has gone on for some time, the parties in the conflict can no longer bear to experience

positive and negative emotions simultaneously in relation to their opponent's attitudes and actions. They reserve for themselves and their own party their positive emotions and their negative emotions for the other party; in this way the emotional situation becomes unambiguous! As the armour of insensitivity hardens, the parties in the conflict will gradually lose sympathy for each other. They increasingly lose the ability to empathize. They isolate themselves from each other emotionally and become prisoners of their own emotional state.

Any attempt to resolve conflict will aim to liberate oneself and others from the prison of one's own feelings and moods and to regain access to the other party through the ability to empathize. Chapter 6 in particular contains exercises and techniques to achieve this.

(3) Changes in will

Here, too, people become biased and paralysed. Through disappointments they focus on a small number of objectives, insisting on them and wanting to achieve them at any price. Their will narrows down to only a few possibilities, becoming absolute and radical. Gradually fanaticism takes hold. The longer disagreement goes on, the more subconscious, deeper layers of will are provoked: drives and instincts are awakened which were wholly natural and justified in earlier stages of personal development but which represent a retrograde step, or regression, in later developmental phases (see Chapter 9).

Conflict resolution therefore needs to contribute towards a loosening and letting go in the domain of the will. Many of the exercises and techniques contained in Chapters 3, 6, 7 and 8 seek to achieve this aim.

(4) Changes in behaviour

The changes described in (1) to (3) become mixed up and find expression in people's words and actions. Through paralysis of the will people's behaviour loses its variety, becomes poorer and simpler. The biggest problem is the fact that a coarsening in behaviour increasingly reduces the extent to which people can

express their thinking, feelings and will. What they say and do is only partly consistent with their intentions. This has many effects on other people which are not intended and mostly not even perceived in that way. This can be so pronounced that *unintentional side effects* have a stronger impact on the opponent than *intended main effects*. This leads to the emergence of dangerous ‘*demonized zones*’: my opponent experiences unpleasant things from me that I did not intend. She hits back and triggers things in me which she did not intend either. But both sides feel these effects, no matter whether or not they were intentional. The conflict parties blame each other – and neither side is prepared to take responsibility for the unintentional consequences. This escalates conflicts even further. Attempts to tackle conflict will examine closely the discrepancy between intentions, behaviour and effects – Chapters 7 and 8 provide some help in this.

An additional problem with all the difficulties already discussed is the fact that (1) perception/thinking/ideas, (2) feelings, (3) will and (4) actions ‘infect one another’ and this intensifies their negative effects. As you will only notice the annoying things about your opponent (1), you like her less and less (2) and your will hardens (3); because of this your perception (1) focuses even more on the behaviour which annoys you; you insist on taking hard measures (3) and respond with bitterness (4), and so on. After a while you have to confront the question ‘Who is actually controlling this conflict?’

1.6 The core question is: ‘Do I have a conflict?’ – or: ‘Does the conflict have me?’

This formulation is not intended as a play on words. ‘The conflict has me’ means that I have *lost self-control* and *self-direction*. I can consciously enter a disagreement, but at a certain level I am no longer able to keep an overview of the situation and to influence it in such a way that, by and large, only the things I intend actually occur. And *if the conflict has me* I am no longer able to step out of the situation and switch off; I am ‘other-directed’, i.e. controlled

from the outside. My perception becomes considerably distorted; I am plagued by ideas and thoughts that I can no longer shake off; I experience emotions that can come to obsess me completely; my will is narrowed down to a small number of goals, and my behaviour becomes simpler, stereotyped and inflexible.

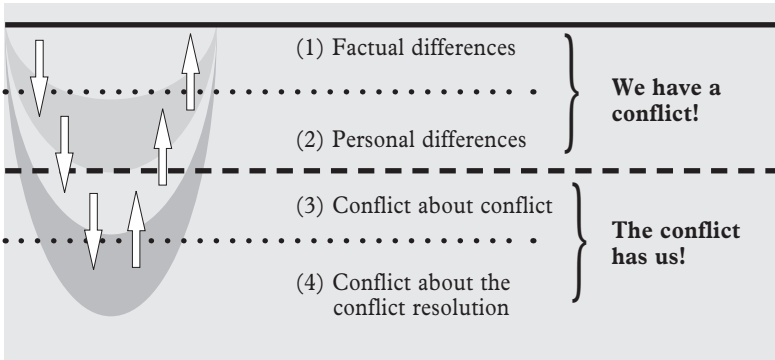


Figure 1.12: Increasing 'self-infection' in conflict situations

In conflict situations there is always a *mutual causality* or *self-infection*. In the language of systems theory this is called *circular causality*. Figure 1.12 shows how 'self-infection' can occur in the course of a difference of opinion.

Self-infection proceeds in the following way: at first there is

- (1) *difference of opinion about facts*. If no agreement is reached,
- (2) the *relationship* between the parties in the conflict is affected because each is annoyed about the perceived stubbornness of the other. However, the difficulties in the interpersonal relationships in turn affect the existing
 - (1) *factual difference*, as the opponents assume more extreme stances. This leads to an infection on the
 - (3) next level, to a *conflict about the conflict*: each side interprets differently the differences on the
 - (1) factual and (2) interpersonal levels. This increases even further the anger on
 - (2) the *interpersonal* level and leads to

- (1) further polarization and hardening of the *factual viewpoints*. As
 (3) the ‘reasons and background’ of the conflict are interpreted differently (*conflict about the conflict*), the parties seek to resolve the situation in different ways, each of which is rejected by the other. There is now
 (4) a *conflict about the conflict resolution*. All of this in turn affects
 (1) the *factual differences* and
 (2) the *interpersonal relationships*, and so on.

The self-infection and intensification progress from one level to the next, leading to complete entanglement.

Self-help has reached its limits as soon as the infection has advanced to level (3), as this is where the *conflict about the conflict* begins (Figure 1.13). This applies equally to conflict amongst conflict experts: where they have themselves become a party in the conflict and have reached level (3), they too should seek external professional help.

Collegial help is not counselling by professional advisers or consultants, but support from neutral people who are trusted by the conflict parties.

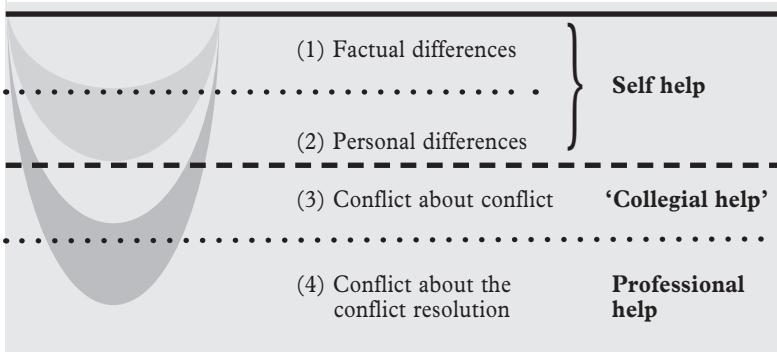


Figure 1.13: The limits of self-help in conflict situations

The limits of self-help can be explained through an analogy with the medical condition of a weakened immune system. Within certain limits the human body has its own resistance. It can deal with colds, flu and similar illnesses as long as its self-healing powers are intact. However, if the immune system itself is impaired or even destroyed by particular viruses, the body needs to be given medication. So-called ‘compensatory therapy’ eases the strain on the organism for a while, so that the immune system is able to return to normal. Its self-healing powers will return. However, if an organism with an impaired immune system were expected to heal itself, it would be unable to cope with this and fail.

This book seeks to show that there is great scope for self-help and support in the shape of ‘collegial help’. Many techniques are intended to help people involved in a conflict to work on themselves and to take constructive action in conflict situations.

1.7 Conflict resistance of organizations

People who are conflict-capable can make a contribution in the organization where they work, so that there are opportunities for a constructive approach to differences, tensions and conflicts. In order to achieve this, certain procedures have to be established which help to recognize emerging tensions early and facilitate ways of dealing with conflict. There must also be platforms where opposites can meet and where the different ideas and interests can be dealt with. Procedures and platforms together are called *conflict regulators*¹³ and are at the core of the ‘conflict resistance’ of an organization.

Many *procedures* can improve the conflict resistance of an organization. There are *flagging techniques* which make visible the first signs of tensions and frictions and deal with them: managers or staff from the personnel department periodically ask their colleagues where they perceive emerging problems in the working atmosphere. This questioning can be done in writing

- through *employee consultation* about the working atmosphere, about interpersonal relationships with colleagues and managers, about identification with the goals of the organization etc;

- through *complaints boxes*, with *noticeboards* in *grumble corners*, in *letters* to the in-house newsletter etc.;
- through *hot-cold maps*: the respondents anonymously colour the organizational structure red where they perceive areas of emerging hot conflict and blue in areas where ‘chilly zones’ are beginning to develop within the organization;
- through annual *fitness checks* (or prophylactic check-ups), in which the organization as a whole is checked for problem areas;
- through *systematic evaluation* of the available *statistics* on sickness, absenteeism, fluctuation, attrition etc.;
- through *forward-looking problem-gathering*: this is not about recording problems that are already visible today but about potential areas of tension that could arise as a result of foreseeable changes in the organization’s environment (market, customers, competitors, suppliers, political changes, reorganization etc.).

Some of the written methods can be replaced by face-to-face meetings and talks, e.g.:

- *forward-looking problem-gathering* within the context of regular *departmental meetings*, or as a result of working games (simulations, roleplay, scenario planning);
- *self-diagnosis discussions* to develop particular areas;
- *feedback* amongst colleagues and between managers and their teams;
- visits by managers and their team members to other areas of the organization or to other organizations, e.g. in the context of *benchmarking activities* or as part of training activities; the visitors then feed back what they noticed in the departments they visited;
- some companies use *induction programmes* for new staff or trainees in order to gain feedback from these people after a few weeks: what did they notice about the working atmosphere? How do they perceive people’s conflict capability?
- through *upward appraisal*, whereby managers are assessed by their own staff – usually in strict anonymity; if serious problems emerge, these are tackled in co-operation with qualified staff or personnel counsellors;

- through *confrontation meetings*: representatives of different departments involved in a complex work process gather information on current problems and deal with them directly or in project groups;
- *supervision and coaching* etc.

These are only a few possibilities. It is worthwhile checking existing procedures periodically and improving them where possible.

Once problems have been flagged up, *measures* are taken for *tackling and resolving* them: this can be done in mixed groups, or in projects etc. An important element of such measures are those that deal with *complaints management* or *grievances*.

An organization can have many platforms, roles or functions that respond to and deal with problem situations, for example:

- *peer supervision in teams* or *learning partnerships* of colleagues;
- *mentoring* systems for people who take on new responsibilities;
- *sponsors* who act as internal or external ‘moral guardians’ for sensitive projects, which are likely to trigger tensions and conflicts;
- *complaints committees*;
- *accident notification*, i.e. people from the personnel department or the organization’s welfare team who can be approached in confidence to discuss problems experienced by individuals, in relation both to themselves and to others;
- internal and external *customer conferences*;
- joint committees and *overlapping teams* for questions that might lead to conflict;
- *ombuds functions* where people can go if they are subjected to social pressure such as *sexual harassment, racial discrimination, bullying* etc.

Such platforms and roles can create a space where people can flag up and deal with differences and conflicts. However, establishing and defining the mechanisms alone does not guarantee a constructive handling of the conflicts that are flagged up. For this to happen, conflict-capable people are needed, who, on the one hand, are not in conflict with themselves and, on the other hand, can apply

practical methods to approach their opponents or partners in conflict situations.

If personal conflict capability is complemented by organizational conflict resistance, an organization can confidently face the challenges which coming years will bring.