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# Managing Conflict In Agricultural Business

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Conflict is a daily reality for everyone. Whether at home or at work, an individual's needs, goals, objectives and values constantly and invariably come into opposition to other desires held by ourselves or others. Some conflicts are relatively minor, easy to handle, or capable of being overlooked. However, others of greater magnitude require a mindful strategy for successful resolution if they are not to create constant tension or lasting enmity in ourselves our homes or farm business.

Conflicts left unresolved and festering at the expense of the business and individuals well being are an all too common occurrence in agriculture and other small business. The ability to successfully resolve conflict is probably one of the most important personal and business skills an individual can possess. In spite of this fact there are few formal opportunities in our society to learn effective conflict management. This is partly because we do not understand conflict due to its complex nature, and partly because even if we understand conflict, and have a good inner working model of what is happening with ourselves and others in a conflict situation, that is still only a small percentage of the knowledge necessary to master to manage conflict. The next step is the development and use of interpersonal communication skills that will allow us to accelerate or decelerate conflicts to resolution.

Like any other human skill, conflict resolution can be taught; like other skills, it consists of a number of important subskills, each separate yet interdependent. These skills need to be assimilated at both the cognitive and the behavioral levels (i.e., Do I under-

stand with my mind how the conflict may be resolved and do I have sufficient mastery with interpersonal skills and behaviors to affect positive change toward resolving specific conflicts?). To learn how to manage conflict, we will first build working definitions of conflict terminology and working models for thinking about and managing conflict. With these models in place, we will move to a discussion of some specific interpersonal conflict resolution skills.

### Terminology

The terminology we will use in the discussion of conflict follows:

**Conflict** – A type of problem involving the collision or opposition of ideas, objectives / goals.

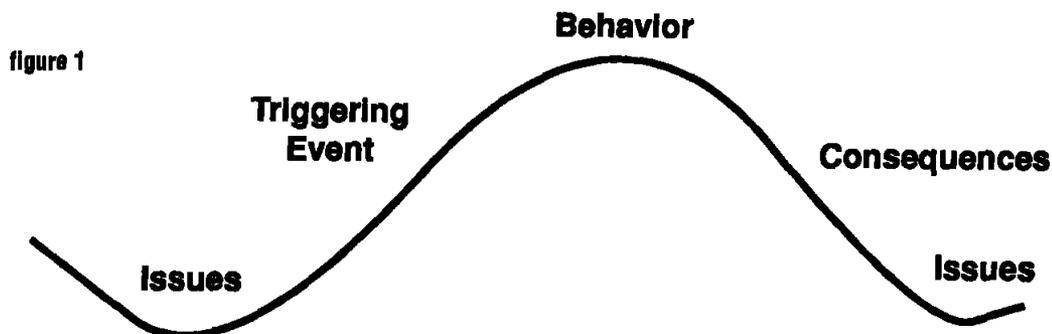
**Content Conflict** – A difference of opinion or clashing objectives/goals on substantive, content, formal task or procedural matters.

**Interpersonal Conflict** – Content disagreement plus negatively charged conflicting interpersonal relationship issues may occur in dependent, formal interpersonal relations, or independent, informal interpersonal relationships.

Conflict is not good or bad. Conflict usually holds the potential to be either, and must be carefully managed to assure the desired outcome. The following list outlines both potential outcomes of conflict.

### Good Side of Conflict

- Properly managed, moderate doses of conflict can be beneficial.
- Conflict is the root of change.
- People learn and grow as a result of conflict.



- Conflict stimulates curiosity and imagination.
- Conflict helps to relieve monotony and boredom.
- Conflict can provide diagnostic information about problem areas.
- After conflict, closer unity may be re-established.

#### **Bad Side of Conflict**

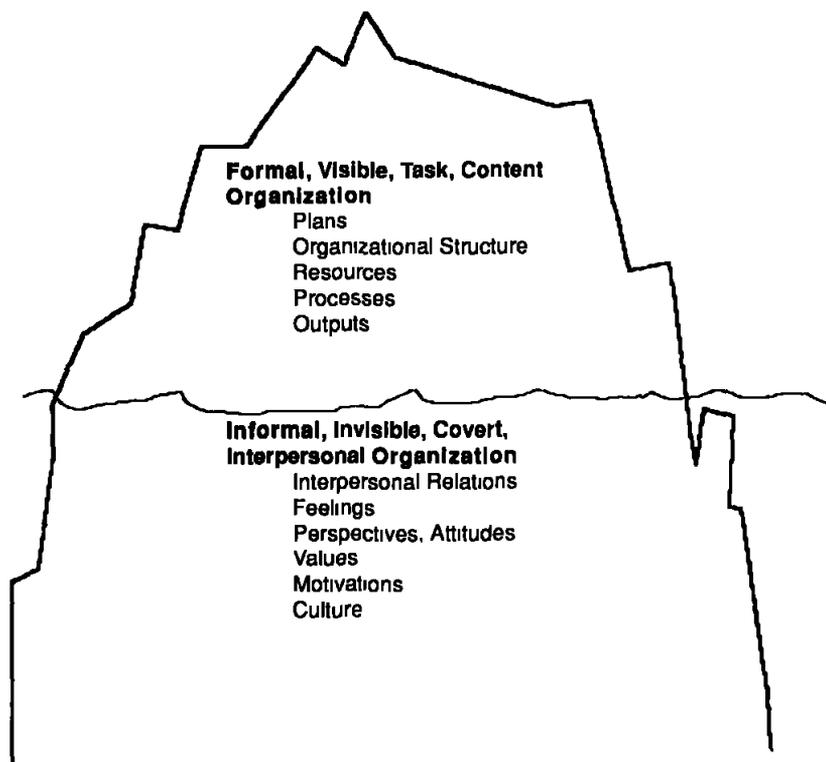
- Prolonged conflict can be injurious to your physical and mental health.
- Conflict diverts time, energy, and money away from reaching important goals.
- Conflict often results in self interest at the expense of the organization.
- Intensive conflict may result in lies and distorted information.

#### **Conceptualizing Conflict**

Conflict can result from substantive differences, that is, differences resulting from objectives, structures, policies, or practices; or it can grow out of personal or emotional differences that occur between people. Another way to examine conflict is to look at differences in four categories: facts, methods, goals and values.

These different viewpoints may exist because of differences in individuals' informational exposure (for example, reading different articles in professional journals), their perception, or the roles or positions they hold.

It can be useful to view conflict as cyclical. Overt conflict might occur only periodically when people's contrary values or goals surface through an activating event. The underlying issues may lie dormant for a while before something happens to trigger a conflict episode. Once triggered, the expressed conflict will usually become less pronounced over time, and the issues may not be apparent until the next triggering event causes the cycle to repeat itself. Richard Walton (1987) studied conflict cycles and identified four basic elements: issues, triggering events, conflict behavior and consequences.



Issues are the substantive, content or interpersonal emotional differences that underlie any conflicting relationship. The triggering event (which may be significant or very minor) causes the latent conflict to be explicitly expressed. The behavior displayed by the conflicting parties leads to the consequences of the exchange. Issues or triggering events may change from one cycle to the next, and the consequences may differ significantly. A conflict cycle may escalate, indicating that the relationship is becoming more conflicting over time. An example of this might be a deteriorating marriage in which the husband and wife begin to fight more frequently and seriously.

A conflict cycle may also de-escalate, indicating that the individuals involved are learning to adjust and work successfully, despite their differences.

In addition to events that trigger a conflict episode, there may be barriers that inhibit the open expression of conflict. For example, an individual

may be afraid of hurting the other person's feelings, or the culture of a particular organization may value teamwork and camaraderie so much that members stifle any potential conflict. If barriers exist and conflict still manifests itself, it may indicate that issues or triggering events are more significant than the barriers.

When successful confrontation and resolution is the goal of managing conflict, many underlying issues may be eliminated. Controlling conflict is another viable goal. In controlling conflict, most of the issues still exist but the negative consequences are minimized. One can control conflict by reinforcing the barriers to conflict or by preventing a triggering event from occurring. This emphasizes the importance or prior analysis of a conflict situation to determine what these elements are.

**The Formal And Informal Organization**

Like plants and icebergs, organizations cannot be totally seen or understood from the surface. We will briefly describe two dimensions of organizations, one above and one below the surface, to facilitate our understanding of leadership and conflict. A manager must be aware of how and be able to operate in both components of the organization for effective interpersonal conflict management to occur. Note carefully the distinction made in the model.

**Context Issues Diagnosis**

Diagnosing the context of a conflict is the starting point in any attempt at resolution. The most important issue which must be decided is whether the conflict is an emotional, informal, interpersonal ideological (value) conflict or a formal, content (tangible) conflict – or a combination of both. The distinction between issues of content and those of an interpersonal nature is a most useful and important one to make to then be able to rationally decide the best strategy and tactics to use in order to come to reso-

lution. The following models are useful in determining the extent to which a conflict is content and/or interpersonally comprised.

**Power Diagnosis**

The next issue to discuss in light of conflict is the issue of power or the lack of it. Careful diagnosis of the balance of power in a conflict will aid us in determining a resolution strategy. This discussion of the sources of power and authority is imperative if we are to understand organizational and interpersonal dynamics and be able to resolve conflicts. Power is described as influence potential: it is this resource that enables one person to gain compliance from or influence over others.

Given this integral power relationship that exists between people, managers must examine their possession and use of power in conflict situations. One can imagine that if a fight were to break out you would put your money on the largest person or the one you thought had the most power and would be most likely to win the conflict. In the case of interpersonal conflicts win/lose situations are not always appropriate and so the use of power or the equalization of power must become a management decision depending on the desired result. The sources of power reviewed in the previous exercise may come from both the formal organization and the informal sides of organizations just as conflict issues do.

These bases of power are important to understand to consciously decide to use or not use power in a given situation. The possession of power or the lack of it may profoundly affect a person's behavioral response to a conflict situation. People must be empowered if your goal is to utilize collaboration or negotiation as a means of resolution.

**Balance Of Power In A Conflict**

Diagnose the context of the conflict and determine who has the power in a conflict sit-

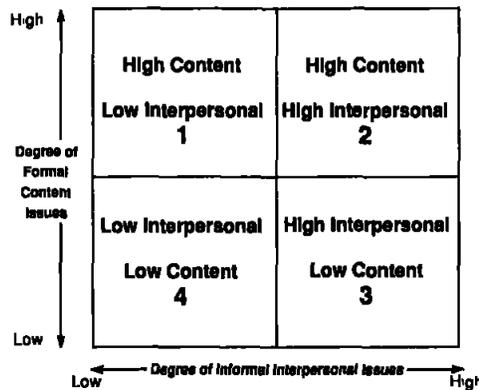


figure 3

**Figure 4: Balance Of Power In A Conflict.**

uation and from what source that power comes. Further, ask if the power is in balance or out of balance. This is not to say that the power should always be equalized to reach resolution. That will depend upon how you decide to handle the conflict. It may be that in a given situation you decide to increase the imbalance of power.

**A. Coercive power** is based on fear. A leader scoring high in coercive power is seen as inducing compliance because failure to comply will lead to punishments such as undesirable work assignments, reprimands or dismissal.

**B. Connection power** is based on the leader's "connections" with influential or important persons inside or outside the organization. A leader scoring high in connection power induces compliance from others because they aim at gaining the favor or avoiding the disfavor of the powerful connection.

**C. Expert power** is based on the leader's possession of expertise, skill, and knowledge, which, through respect, influences others. A leader scoring high in expert power is seen as possessing the expertise to facilitate the work behavior of others. This respect leads to compliance with the leader's wishes.

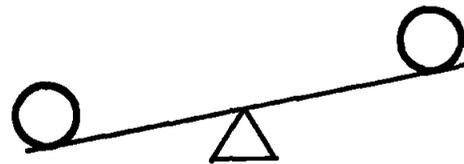
**D. Information power** is based on the leader's position of, or access to, information that is perceived as valuable to others. This power base influences others because they need this information or want to be let "in on things."

**E. Formal power** is based on the formal position held by the leader. Normally, the higher the position the higher the legitimate power tends to be. A leader scoring high in legitimate power induces compliance from or influences others because they feel that this person has the right, by virtue or position in the organization, to expect that suggestions

Power is in balance or equal between parties



Power is out of balance or unequal between parties



will be followed.

**F. Personal power** is based on the leader's personal traits. A leader scoring high in referent power is generally liked and admired by others because of personality. This liking for, admiration for, and identification with the leader influences others.

**G. Reward power** is based on the leader's ability to provide rewards for other people. They believe that their compliance will lead to gaining positive incentives such as pay, promotions or recognition.

#### **The Technical Components:**

##### **People, Process And Context**

We must look in depth at some technical issues involved in conflicts and establish some models for understanding them. All conflict situations differ. Therefore, we can never assume that all of them can be resolved in a reasonable constructive manner. Nor should we always see conflict as a life and death, win or lose struggle. Each situation should be seen on its own terms. As we look at conflict from the point of view of resolution, we will consider the following issues: the people involved, the context of the situation and the process.

#### **PEOPLE**

##### **1. Characteristics of the parties involved**

- values, motivations, aspirations, objectives
- physical, intellectual, social, emotional, spiritual development
- beliefs about conflict, conceptions of strategy and tactics

- default conflict behavior patterns integrated or polarized
2. *Prior relationships to one another*
    - attitudes, beliefs, expectations about one another
    - beliefs about other's view of oneself
    - degree of polarization (How far apart are they?)
  3. *Consequences of conflict to each participant*
    - gains and losses (wins and losses)
    - precedents set for the future
    - changes as a result of conflict

**PROCESS**

1. *Strategy and tactics employed by parties involved (extent of use)*
  - promises and rewards
  - threats and punishments
  - freedom of choice/coercion
  - openness of communication and sharing of information
  - avoidance
  - approach

**CONTEXT**

1. *Nature of issue giving rise to conflict*
  - scope, rigidity, significance frequency
  - formal – task – content
  - informal – interpersonal
2. *Social environment within which conflict occur*

- restraints, encouragements, deterrents and social norms concerning strategy and tactics
3. *Interested audiences to conflict*
    - relationships to the individuals involved

**Conflict-Management Styles**

*(Adapted by Guy K. Hutt from Martin B. Ross 1982 Annual for Facilitators, Trainers, and Consultants)*

The ability to cope successfully with conflict is among the most important social skills one can acquire. As people mature they usually develop behaviors for coping with conflict; there is even some evidence that they develop certain preferred styles (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974). Almost invariably, conflict-management skills are acquired without formal education or guidance. Usually behaviors are modeled after the behavior of others. If one is fortunate enough to have good models, and if one is lucky enough to be in situations in which the modeled style is effective, one is usually successful. If not, one may learn an effective style too late. The best way to minimize failure is to learn what styles are available, in what situations they are most effectively employed, and how to use them.

The model of conflict patterns developed for this paper, based on the earlier work of Thomas (1976), provides an excellent framework for learning various conflict-management behaviors, their situation-

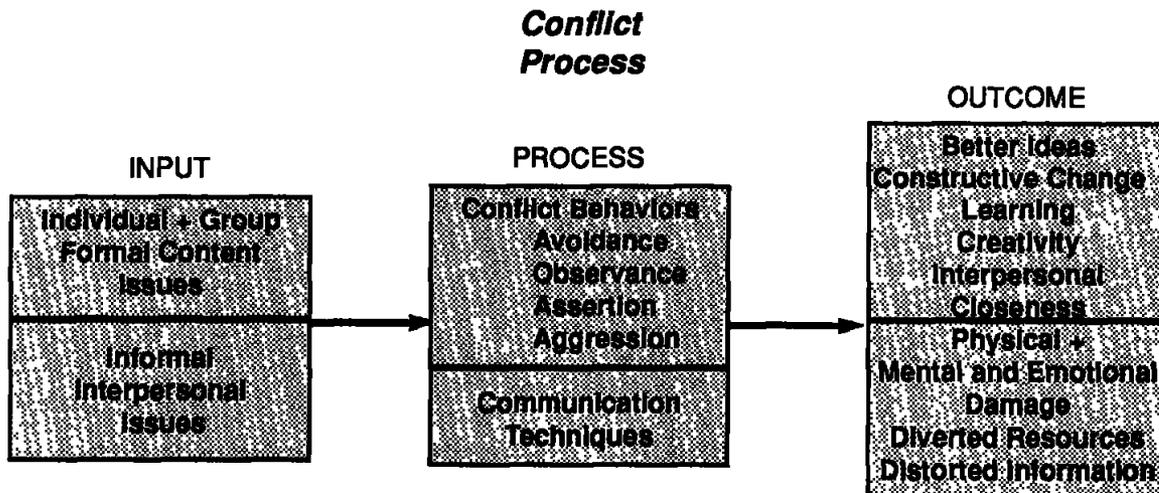
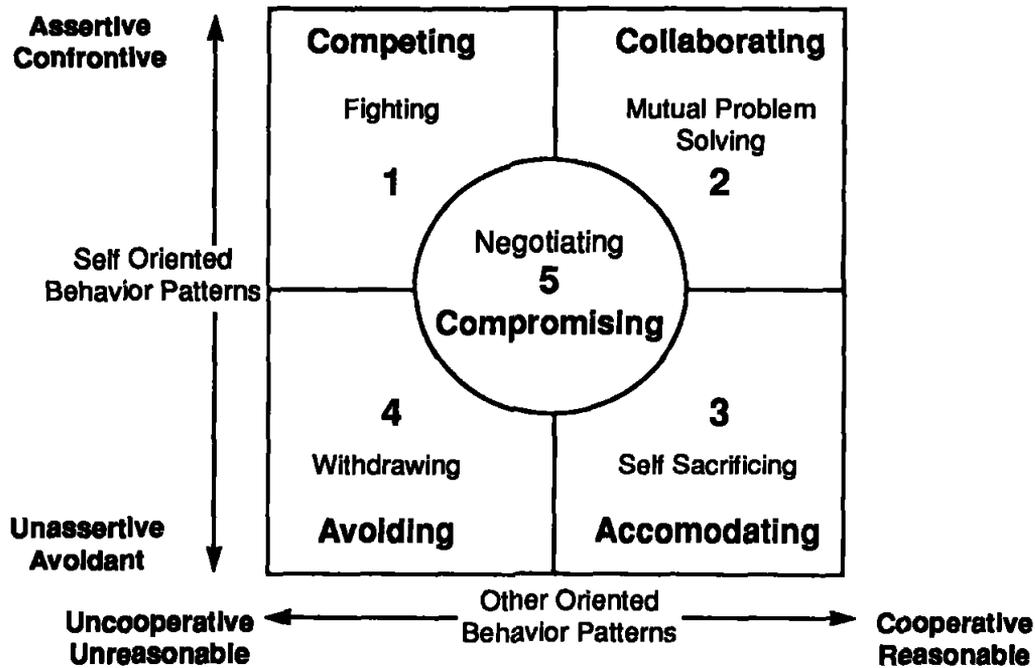


Figure 6: Conflict Patterns



specific assets and liabilities, and the consequences of using a particular style too little or too much. As shown in the model, two basic variables are plotted against one another (1) assertiveness, the extent to which the individual attempts to satisfy his or her own concerns, and (2) cooperativeness, the extent to which the individual attempts to satisfy the other person's concerns. These two dimensions define five distinct styles for coping with conflict: competition, collaboration, avoidance, accommodation and compromise.

**Which Pattern Or Style To Use**

Nothing is inherently right or wrong about any of the conflict-management styles; each may be more or less appropriate and effective, depending on the situation and the parties involved.

Each of us has access to a variety of conflict-management behaviors but we tend to perceive certain ones and use them to the exclusion of others that could be more effective in a given situation, often with adverse consequences. We must develop the

skills to execute any of the styles. Then we can diagnose conflict situations and choose the appropriate way to deal with whatever come up, depending on our needs at the time and the importance of coming to a resolution within a prescribed time frame.

Whether a particular conflict-management pattern or style is appropriate is specific to the people and context of the conflict situation. To be effective at managing conflict, one should be able to use any of the styles and know when each style is appropriate. However, people tend to develop one preferred or default style and use it in most situations. As a consequence, people may neglect styles that could be more effective.

**Steps For Collaborative Conflict Resolution**

1. Explain the situation the way you see it. Emphasize that you are presenting your perception of the problem. Specific facts and feelings should be used if possible.

2. Describe how it is affecting performance. Keep attention on the work-related problem and away

from the personalities involved. Present the problem in a way that will be readily understood, and concentrate on important issues.

3. Ask for the other viewpoint to be explained. Before proposing solutions, gather as much information as possible. This step confirms that you respect the other person's opinion and need his or her cooperation. Listen carefully while he or she talks and be open to learning and changing.

4. Agree on the problem. Summarize the various viewpoints and state clearly the problem that you and the other participant(s) think needs to be solved. Once both parties agree on this, they can more easily focus on developing solutions.

5. Explore and discuss possible solutions. To ensure shared ownership of the problem's resolution, all participants in the conflict should be involved in developing solutions. The synergy developed may result in better solutions that any participant would have produced alone.

6. Agree on what each person will do to solve the problem. Every person involved must clearly understand his or her role in the solution and accept responsibility as an individual and team member for making it work.

7. Set a date for follow-up. A follow-up meeting allows you to evaluate progress and make adjustments as necessary. People are much more likely to follow through if they know they will be held accountable for their commitments at a follow-up meeting.

### **Some Communication/Process Requirements For Successful Conflict Resolution**

1. Focus is on defeating the problem, not one another.

2. Everyone is involved in the process to create a sense of shared responsibility for the solution.

3. Solutions are evaluated in terms of quality and acceptance to the parties.

4. Questions are asked to elicit information, not to belittle the other party.

5. Feedback is descriptive, specific and non-judgmental.

6. Power is equal or power differences are

ignored.

7. Information is shared equally by everyone.

8. Parties believe that mutually acceptable solutions are possible and desirable.

9. Parties trust each other, are not defensive, angry or threatened.

10. Parties do not make a "we-they" distinction; instead it's "we vs. the problem."

11. Problems are jointly defined by the parties.

12. Problem description, solution generation and solution evaluation are separate phases of discussion.

### **Key Learning Points**

Conflict has both positive and negative consequences for an organization and for an individual. The absence of conflict can be as dysfunctional as excessive amounts of conflict.

There are five basic conflict styles, all of which have potential uses. Choosing the appropriate style to use depends on the situation at hand.

Thoroughly analyzing a conflict situation is vital to ensure that an appropriate resolution strategy is used. Control and confrontation are both legitimate strategies.

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