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INTERNATIONAL NEGOTIATION ACADEMY  
*Negotiation: The Genesis of Management*



# Negotiation Skills Training

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## Conflict, Aggression and Violence at Home and Work

### ✍ Constructive and Destructive Conflict

Conflict can be **constructive** (when it is directed towards solving a problem), or destructive (when it is directed at someone personally or at another group).

Conflict could be even **too low** and therefore influencing group performance because of a lack of need to adhere to agreements. It could be **too high**, resulting in chaos and breakdown of negotiations or it could be **optimal**, resulting in a positive, functional agreement that will hold for both parties.

### ✍ Causes of destructive conflict

**Frustration** lies at the core of most interpersonal or intergroup conflict. When individuals feel that their movement towards their objectives is blocked or hindered, they can become self-centred and disruptive. For example;

If there exists a work **interdependence** between groups or individuals, it could lead to frustration due to their dependence on one another to complete their tasks. The conflict potential in such situations is high.

A **Pooled interdependence** (e.g. two branches of a supermarket chain in different regions) is sometimes the cause of conflict because, although there is no interaction between the groups, the **pooled** performances of all the groups determine on how successful the organisation will be.

In a **sequential interdependence** one group must do its work before the next group can complete its task (e.g. a motor assembly plant). Tasks are performed in a sequential fashion (one part must be assembled before it can be connected to the

power source). The output of

one group serves as the input of another and conflict potential is high.

Conflict could easily occur there is a **reciprocal interdependence** and the output of

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each group serves as the input for the other (e.g. an operating theatre in a hospital). This occurs when expert teams from different departments are required to give their input at the same time.

When people's **goals differ widely** it could be the cause of frequent conflict; also during negotiations. Parties will have to move considerably more relative to one another before they can come to an agreement. The same goes when people compete for limited resources or when 'unfair' reward structures exist in the same organisation, family or group.

There could be **different time horizons** between individuals and parties. For the one party it could be important to reach an agreement or finish a task within a deadline, while others are much less concerned with the constraints of time.

There could be large **differences in status** between two sides at work or around the table, with the result that the parties will be at different levels of satisfaction of their esteem needs, causing them to have totally different objectives.

There could be **differences in information and expertise** causing conflict about the accuracy of information. In the same fashion the **credibility** of some of the experts could be in doubt and in competition with the opposition.

**Cultural differences**, which result in a lack of understanding about language, habits, attitudes and education, could also lead to misunderstanding that could cause dysfunctional conflict.

Apart from all the causes of conflict mentioned above, there could be many other social and psychological reasons.

## ✍ **Consequences of conflict**

At home, work or in life in general (and during negotiations) there are many different consequences of conflict and aggression. Heightening tension, stress, and aggression could cause individuals or groups to become:

More **cohesive**, or leaders could become more **autocratic**. Tense, long lasting **deadlocks** could occur or **conflict could escalate**. Some people, on the other hand, could simply **adhere** (due to an inherent dislike of any form of conflict)

## ✍ **Handling conflict and aggression**

There are many ways of handling conflict and aggression, depending on the cause of the conflict. It is therefore important for negotiators to understand the underlying reason for their opponent's aggressive behaviour, irrational acts and escalation of the conflict situation.

There are **many approaches** to this problem and it could vary, depending to the situation. It could include one or more of the following:

### **1. Separation**

Breaking off face-to-face relationships is the most common approach to facilitate the cooling of inflamed tempers.

### **2. Identifying a common enemy**

In some respects, identifying a common enemy could help groups to resolve their differences temporarily. It could also unite them on some form of **common ground**. The common enemy may be a competitor who has just

introduced a superior product; it may be the receiver of revenue, the government, the threat of unemployment, or bankruptcy.

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### 3. Role reversal

When conflict becomes more heated, communication efforts concentrate on managing emotions and directing the next assault at the opponent (the focus on the problem becomes diluted). **Effective listening** declines. Parties think they know what the other side are going to say, and therefore do not listen carefully. In intense conflict, listening becomes so diminished that the parties are frequently unaware that their positions may have much in common. It is often termed as 'blindness **of involvement**', since it inhibits the development of trust and the problem-solving process.

**Role reversal** is one way of helping each side see things from the others' perspective. In the case of conflict one party will then invite the other party to put themselves in their shoes, looking at the issue from the other's perspective. They could even invite the others to explain how they would handle the problem if they were the other party.

### 4. The 'declare' approach

To declare means to 'open up' feelings, distrust, behaviour and worries that may be the cause of the increased tension. **Declaring your 'feelings'** could be instrumental in diffusing potential conflict (for example 'your outburst made me feel as if you do not care about the survival of the company. I am sure you do care.....or am I wrong?').

### 5. Creative alternatives

Many disputes reach an impasse, not because the party's positions were so far apart, but because neither wants to discuss alternatives. Being able to come up with creative alternatives

is one of the basic requirements of successfully solving differences. If the creative process is done **jointly** (such as with a brainstorm) it allows all parties to become winners regardless of

tension and conflict during the earlier stages of the process.

### 6. Empathy and humour

Empathy and feelings of amusement and humour are often underrated as effective means of dealing with potentially aggressive and conflicting situations. The reason for this is possibly based on the well established principle that human beings are seldom capable to engage in two **incompatible responses** at the same time. Therefore it would be expected that the introduction of responses incompatible with anger or aggression could be highly effective in inhibiting conflict and verbal assaults against aggressors.

Therefore, if opposing parties respond to an aggressive outburst with either empathy of humour or another emotion that is incompatible with the expressed anger of the other party, it could be highly effective.

### 7. Visible suffering

When aggressors verbally attack other people in face-to-face confrontations, they are often exposed to signs of pain and suffering on the part of their 'victims'. The **sudden tears** of your wife or child could cause you to change your behaviour from aggression to sympathy.

### 8. The fractionating approach

As was noted earlier, a major difficulty in the resolution of conflict is that, as a conflict intensifies, the size and number of the issues involved expand. As a conflict escalates it '**snowballs**' and bits and pieces of other issues are accumulated in a large,

unmanageable mass. The tactic of 'fractionating' or 'breaking up' of huge masses into small bits is often an extremely effective method of dealing with problems and conflict.

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While small conflicts can be managed one at a time, larger conflicts become unwieldy and less susceptible to any easy resolution. The problem of negotiators, therefore, is to develop strategies to contain issue proliferation and **reduce the dispute** to manageable proportions.

### **Managing conflict at Home**

It is important for our general happiness and constructive growth to also be able to manage the **aggression between family members** as constructively as possible. Conflict at home can often be the source of extreme unhappiness and under-performance at school and work.

In an article by Bob Blyth (Mediate.com) he discusses some tools that parents and teenagers can use to manage their conflicts constructively.

'Teenagers and their parents have conflict. How this conflict is managed is **critical**. If constructively, families divide. Behaviour and relationships degrade. Even criminal conduct may follow as result of it.'

According to Blyth a teenagers' behaviour is often confusing for both the adolescent and the parent. The teenager is no longer a child, yet not quite an adult. Teenagers are struggling for their independence, yet sometimes unwilling to assume the accompanying responsibility. They often want to **make their own rules** yet have difficulty following family rules. Sometimes parents have a hard time letting their teenagers have the freedom they think they deserve.

"Because parents and teenagers care about each other, emotions exaggerate their differences. **Openly acknowledging** and managing these emotions is the key to managing these conflicts constructively."

"Parents and their teenagers have more things in common than they think. **Both share: frustration, stress, and fear of failure.** They both want the best for each other. How they

deal with these feelings and desires can be

crucial. It can also be a basis for managing conflict constructively."

"When communication starts breaking down, **emotional tension** increases. Communication becomes more difficult and constructive conflict resolution more difficult. Conflict can spin out of control."

"Underlying all constructive conflict management is understanding. The feeling that you are understood, and **understanding** the situation from the other perspective. Knowing that you are understood creates **respect for you** and your position. Understanding a situation from the other perspective creates an environment that fosters formulation of mutually beneficial solutions."

"Asking **open-ended questions** that begin with how, when, where, do, what or is, is a great place to start. Tensions ease and the shift to problem solving comes naturally."

The question of **dealing with conflict at home** is, of course, a complex problem with many and varied unique features specific to the family; yet without constructive confrontation and the necessary skills, empathy and process in place; this can become a life destroying phenomenon. It is worthwhile to consult proper sources and experts in the quest for managing a home in such a way that it will lead to development, happiness and growth for everyone involved.

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