

## ***Conflict: Nightmare or Opportunity in Higher Education Leadership***

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### **Abstract**

Conflict is inevitable: People have different personalities, coping skills and manifest stress differently. Being a leader in the 21<sup>st</sup> century requires a skill set to be able to navigate conflict in a healthy and productive way rather than destructive and at times deadly. Throughout this article a variety of theoretical frameworks, strategies and interventions will be provided to the reader. Conflict can be a productive change agent provided that the leaders leading the team are able to communicate, problem solve, tap into their emotional and social intelligence and be civil in their daily interactions with subordinates. Ethical dilemmas are abundant in the workplace, ethical decision making is often at the root of many conflicts. Lack of morality, civility and conscience are allowing problems to escalate to the peak of crisis with workers quitting jobs in masses and unhealthy stress behaviors on the rise throughout the workforce. A series of step by step interventions are presented to the reader as possible directions when faced with conflict.

Keywords: Conflict Resolution, Ethical Dilemmas, Mediation, Resistance, Leadership, Problem Solving Interventions

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## Conflict: Nightmare or Opportunity in Higher Education Leadership

Quote: “In the middle of difficulty lies opportunity”, Albert Einstein

Conflict is inevitable. Where there are groups of people, individuals will not be always be able to be in agreement or have consensus on a situation or problem.

Personality is what makes us unique. Our differences often lead to creative change but also to great chaos and conflict. The goal is whether that conflict is destructive or constructive. One leads to great transformation and change while the other leads to withdrawal, isolation and unhealthy work life stress and death in some cases.

Textbook Definition: “Conflict is a struggle that occurs when individuals, interdependent with others, perceive that those others are interfering with their goal attainment.” (Watson, 1972)

Key research questions:

What are the key benefits and disadvantages associated with conflict?

What hinders us from seeing conflict as constructive? How can we overcome these obstacles?

What impact does culture have on our perspectives around conflict?

What are successful tools and processes for conflict resolution in the workplace and in educational settings?

In many cases, effective conflict resolution can make the difference between positive and negative outcomes. The good news is that by resolving conflict successfully, you can solve many of the problems that it has brought to the surface, as well as getting benefits that you might not at first expect:

1. Increased understanding: The discussion needed to resolve conflict expands people's awareness of the situation, giving them an insight into how they can achieve their own goals without undermining those of other people.
2. Increased group cohesion: When conflict is resolved effectively, team members can develop stronger mutual respect, and a renewed faith in their ability to work together.
3. Improved self-knowledge: Conflict pushes individuals to examine their goals in close detail, helping them understand the things that are most important to them, sharpening their focus, and enhancing their effectiveness. However, if conflict is not handled effectively, the results can be damaging. Conflicting goals can quickly turn into personal dislike. Teamwork breaks down. Talent is wasted as people disengage from their work. And it's easy to end up in a vicious downward spiral of negativity and recrimination. (Mindtools.com, 2014).

Causes of Conflict:

The Five Types of Conflict: (Fisher & Ury, 1981, 2011)

1. Data Conflicts are caused by: lack of information, misinformation, and different views on what is relevant, different interpretation of data, different assessment, and procedures.

2. Interest conflicts are caused by perceived or actual competitive, substantive content interests, procedural interests, and psychological interests.
3. Structural conflicts are caused by destructive patterns of behavior or interaction, unequal control or ownership of limited resources, unequal power and authority, geographic, physical, or environmental relations that hinder cooperation and time constraints.
4. Value conflicts are caused by different criteria for evaluating ideas or behavior, exclusive intrinsically valuable goals, different ways of life ideology and religion.
5. Relationship conflicts are caused by strong emotions, misperceptions or stereotypes, poor or miscommunication and repetitive negative behavior.

Categories are related to interests, rights, and power: a) conflict between individuals with different goals, b) conflict between individuals with the same goals, c) conflict about power, and d) conflict within individuals. (Friend, 2010). Administrators in higher education are often in a leadership role where they are asked to negotiate, problem solve, resolve and manage conflict on a daily basis. Examples of Higher

Education problems:

Individuals with different goals conflict is often seen with competing faculty members within the same academic department who see the vision and mission of their department, college, university differently and are both competing for their own agendas to be in the forefront of the department's development and growth.

Individuals with the same goals often are side tracked by their own egos, agendas or experiences that put them in conflict with others. These individuals are often poor at communication and are typically reactive as they are unable to work collaboratively because of these competing agendas or egos.

Power is often at the root cause of many conflicts. A department chair or dean or provost makes a decision and depending on whether the individual faculty member is involved or a recipient of the decision, will result in whether power becomes a main ingredient in the conflict. Collaborative leadership decision making process is often much more successful in achieving results rather than authoritarian styles. (Goleman & Boyatzis 2013). Another factor is the response by the administrator, a defensive response will only escalate the conflict, negotiation and discussion may achieve a balanced approach to the problem or conflict.

Conflict within individuals discusses the wellbeing of the individual involved in the conflict. People have different coping skills, vast experiences that influence their perspectives on issues and problems thus finding their way into personal dynamics and relationship within the workplace.

Resistance: Agree vs Disagree: The Battle Begins

What is Resistance? Most often happens as a response to change. The ability to not get what is not wanted from the environment. Or is a defense mechanism that prevents change. Finally, individuals perceiving the risk as unsafe. The indicators of resistance are typically: refusal to participate; supporting in words but not actions,

displacing responsibility, deferring change to a future time, reliance on past practices. It is always a conundrum to address the resistance or not. One must see the appropriateness of resistance, whether addressing resistance is warranted and the extent to which others are committed to change. If these components are missing you may need to do a more thorough investigation of the resistance (Rognes, 2010).

The key to any effective intervention when dealing with resistance is communication. One needs to use gained knowledge and skills to assist in your response to conflict or resistance. Consider the following: Frame of reference, asking questions, using statements, providing feedback, and problem-solving strategies. Another key component is to understand what you as the facilitator is bringing to the process, be aware of your own biases and communication styles.

Quote:” Conflict is Inevitable but Combat is Optional.” Max Lucado  
Understanding the Theory: Conflict Styles

In the 1970s Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann identified five main styles of dealing with conflict that vary in their degrees of cooperativeness and assertiveness. They argued that people typically have a preferred conflict resolution style. However they also noted that different styles were most useful in different situations. They developed the Thomas Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) which helps you to identify which style you tend towards when conflict arises. Test is available online at <https://takethetki.com/product/the-thomas-kilmann-instrument-tki/>

Thomas and Kilmann's styles are:

**Competitive:** People who tend towards a competitive style take a firm stand, and know what they want. They usually operate from a position of power, drawn from things like position, rank, expertise, or persuasive ability. This style can be useful when there is an emergency and a decision needs to be made fast; when the decision is unpopular; or when defending against someone who is trying to exploit the situation selfishly. However it can leave people feeling bruised, unsatisfied and resentful when used in less urgent situations.

**Collaborative:** People tending towards a collaborative style try to meet the needs of all people involved. These people Conflict Resolution - Resolving conflict rationally and effectively can be highly assertive but unlike the competitor, they cooperate effectively and acknowledge that everyone is important. This style is useful when you need to bring together a variety of viewpoints to get the best solution; when there have been previous conflicts in the group; or when the situation is too important for a simple trade-off.

**Compromising:** People who prefer a compromising style try to find a solution that will at least partially satisfy everyone. Everyone is expected to give up something, and the compromiser him- or herself also expects to relinquish something. Compromise is useful when the cost of conflict is higher than the cost of losing ground, when equal strength opponents are at a standstill and when there is a deadline looming.

**Accommodating:** This style indicates a willingness to meet the needs of others at the expense of the person's own needs. The accommodator often knows when to give in to others, but can be persuaded to surrender a position even when it is not warranted. This person is not assertive but is highly cooperative. Accommodation is appropriate when the issues matter more to the other party, when peace is more valuable than winning, or when you want to be in a position to collect on this "favor" you gave. However people may not return favors, and overall this approach is unlikely to give the best outcomes.

**Avoiding:** People tending towards this style seek to evade the conflict entirely. This style is typified by delegating controversial decisions, accepting default decisions, and not wanting to hurt anyone's feelings. It can be appropriate when victory is impossible, when the controversy is trivial, or when someone else is in a better position to solve the problem. However in many situations this is a weak and ineffective approach to take. Once you understand the different styles, you can use them to think about the most appropriate approach (or mixture of approaches) for the situation you're in. You can also think about your own instinctive approach, and learn how you need to change this if necessary. Ideally you can adopt an approach that meets the situation, resolves the problem, respects people's legitimate interests, and mends damaged working relationships. (Pivotal Education.com, 2019)

## Ethical Dilemmas

An ethical dilemma or ethical paradox is a decision-making problem between two possible moral imperatives, neither of which is unambiguously acceptable or preferable. The complexity arises out of the situational conflict in which obeying one would result in transgressing another. (Wikipedia, 2019).

Ethical dilemmas in leadership are varied and plentiful, they are an integral part of any type of leadership position. The goal is to navigate these successfully to ensure longevity in the role as a higher education leader. The influence of the climate and culture of the institution will influence whether academic leaders make unethical decisions. Scandals at higher education institutions have been plentiful and documented in the news almost daily with infractions and incidents. The most recent was the College Admission Scandal at University of Southern California where there were 8 universities involved, 11 college employees, 45 students and \$5.9 million dollars paid directly or indirectly to college employees, ( Fry, H et al 2019).

Another major sex abuse scandal was at the Penn State University where abuse was rampant and cover up went on for years with Coach Sandusky and President Joe Paterno eventually serving jail time. UC Santa Cruz suicide. Denise Denton took her own life in 2006, apparently the only suicide of a university president in recent decades. She had been pilloried for alleged overspending, including \$600,000 in renovations to her university residence, a \$30,000 dog run (included in the \$600,000) and a \$192,000-a-year job for her partner. Student protesters had followed her around campus. She leapt to her death from the roof of a San Francisco high-rise.(de Vise, Daniel, 2011)This is but the tip of the iceberg in higher education scandals with administrators and leaders. The root cause was the lack of being able to identify and resolve conflict in effective ways or the costs of resolving the conflict would have been too great and would have resulted in termination or poor press. The individuals

chose to ignore, procrastinate or deny the issues till they became a full blown scandal and eventually lead to death, termination or jail time for some of these institutional leaders. The results would have been different if they had made the decision to intervene and resolve the conflict.

## Effective Conflict Resolution through Negotiation, Communication and Relationships

Conflict can be resolved successfully with the following foundational components of Negotiation

- Goal: not for one to win while others lose
- Conflict management technique
- Long history of success in business
- Can be used for many types of conflict
- Focuses on issues, not people involved
- Reduces the emotional component ( Friend & Cook 2010) ( Millar, 1984)

A second theory to conflict resolution is commonly referred to as the "Interest-Based Relational (IBR) Approach". This type of conflict resolution respects individual differences while helping people avoid becoming too entrenched in a fixed position. In resolving conflict using this approach, you follow these rules: (Dickie, 2015)

- Make sure that good relationships are the first priority: As far as possible, make sure that you treat the other calmly and that you try to build mutual respect. Do your best to be courteous to one-another and remain constructive under pressure.
- Keep people and problems separate: Recognize that in many cases the other person is not just "being difficult" – real and valid differences can lie behind conflictive positions. By separating the problem from the person, real issues can be debated without damaging working relationships.
- Pay attention to the interests that are being presented: By listening carefully you'll most-likely understand why the person is adopting his or her position.
- Listen first; talk second: To solve a problem effectively you have to understand where the other person is coming from before defending your own position.
- Set out the "Facts": Agree and establish the objective, observable elements that will have an impact on the decision.
- Explore options together: Be open to the idea that a third position may exist, and that you can get to this idea jointly. (Friend & Cook 2010), ( Mindtools 2014)
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By following these rules, you can often keep contentious discussions positive and constructive. This helps to prevent the antagonism and dislike which so-often causes conflict to spin out of control.

## Using the Tool Conflict Resolution Process

Step One: Set the Scene If appropriate to the situation, agree the rules of the IBR Approach (or at least consider using the approach yourself.) Make sure that people understand that the conflict may be a mutual problem, which may be best resolved

through discussion and negotiation rather than through raw aggression. If you are involved in the conflict, emphasize the fact that you are presenting your perception of the problem. Use active listening skills to ensure you hear and understand other's positions and perceptions. 1. Restate 2. Paraphrase 3. Summarize and make sure that when you talk, you're using an adult, assertive approach rather than a submissive or aggressive style.

**Step Two: Gather Information** Here you are trying to get to the underlying interests, needs, and concerns. Ask for the other person's viewpoint and confirm that you respect his or her opinion and need his or her cooperation to solve the problem. Try to understand his or her motivations and goals, and see how your actions may be affecting these. Also, try to understand the conflict in objective terms: Is it affecting work performance? Damaging the delivery to the client? Disrupting team work? Hampering decision-making? Or so on. Be sure to focus on work issues and leave personalities out of the discussion. 1. Listen with empathy and see the conflict from the other person's point of view. 2. Identify issues clearly and concisely. 3. Use "I" statements. 4. Remain flexible. 5. Clarify feelings.

**Step Three: Agree the Problem** this sounds like an obvious step, but often different underlying needs, interests and goals can cause people to perceive problems very differently. You'll need to agree the problems that you are trying to solve before you'll find a mutually acceptable solution. Different people sometimes see different but interlocking problems – if you can't reach a common perception of the problem, then at the very least, you need to understand what the other person sees as the problem.

**Step Four: Brainstorm Possible Solutions** If everyone is going to feel satisfied with the resolution, it will help if everyone has had fair input in generating solutions. Brainstorm possible solutions, and be open to all ideas, including ones you never considered before.

**Step Five: Negotiate a Solution** By this stage, the conflict may be resolved: Both sides may better understand the position of the other, and a mutually satisfactory solution may be clear to all. However you may also have uncovered real differences between your positions. This is where a technique like win-win negotiation can be useful to find a solution that, at least to some extent, satisfies everyone. There are three guiding principles here: Be Calm, Be Patient, Have Respect...<http://www.uvm.edu/~aellis5/Mind.tools.pdf> (2014)

#### Interventions for Data, Interest, Structural, Value, Relationship Conflicts

**Data Interventions:** reach agreement on what is important, agree on process to collect data, develop common criteria to assess data, use third party experts to gain outside opinion or break deadlocks.

**Interest-Based Interventions:** focus on interests not positions, look for objective criteria, develop integrative solutions that address all parties' needs, search for ways to expand options or resources, and develop tradeoffs to satisfy interests of different strengths.

Structural Interventions: clearly define/change roles, replace destructive behavior patterns, establish a fair and a mutually acceptable decision making process, change negotiation process from position to interest based bargaining, modify means of influence used by participants, less coercion and more persuasion.

Value Interventions: avoid defining problem in terms of value, allow parties to agree to disagree, create spheres of influence where one set of values dominates and search for common areas of values.

Relationship Interventions: control expression of emotions through procedures, promote expression of emotions by legitimizing feelings and providing a process, clarify perceptions/build positive perception, improve quality, quantity, of communication, block negative repetitive behavior by changing structure, and encourage positive problem solving attitudes. ( Fry, 1981,2011).

## Mediation

Mediation is often a more productive approach to resolving conflict in the workplace than more formal methods. It can help to improve trust and team relationships, especially if it is used to deal with conflicts promptly, as soon as they arise. It is often not recommended for harassment, sexual assault allegations and bullying as this would put the victim in an unsafe position. It is confidential, and needs to be facilitated by a manager or another team member who both sides can trust to be objective, unbiased and non-judgmental.

Begin mediation by listening to each person's story separately. Next, bring them together to meet face-to-face. Allow them an equal chance to speak and to explain their perspective. Brainstorm mutually beneficial solutions and, once both parties settle on one, summarize the agreement.

Finally, clarify what steps each participant needs to take and what the expectations are for the future.

## **A Step-by-Step Guide to Mediation**

The following guide is detailed at : <https://www.mediate.com/articles/steppJ.cfm>  
08/20/2019

The mediator acts as a go-between and an enabler in a conversation between the people involved in the conflict. He or she helps them to come to a mutually satisfactory agreement, and avoid getting derailed or stuck in an argument.

It's important that he reserves his own judgment and guides people toward their own resolution, rather than suggesting or ruling on the outcome himself. However, he must ensure a fair solution, guarding against the effects of any imbalance of power between the participants.

Use these six steps to help you to mediate successfully:



## **1. Establish the Ground Rules**

First, meet with each participant separately, to outline what they can expect from you and from the process. Make sure that they are both willing to participate – mediation won't work if you try to impose it!

Agree some ground rules for the next stage of the process. These might include asking each person to come prepared with some solutions or ideas, listening with an open mind, and avoiding interruptions. It's important that you build trust with both participants, and make them feel safe enough to talk openly and truthfully with you and with one another.

Tip:

Mediation is confidential for everyone involved, unless they all agree to share their actions and comments with others. Be sure to remind participants of this regularly, to make sure that they are comfortable with and adhere to the process.

## **2. Have a Full and Frank Discussion with Each Person, Individually**

Find a quiet room in a neutral location where you won't be disturbed, away from the rest of the team.

Meeting with the participants individually will allow them to share their side of the story with you openly and honestly. Use active listening skills and open questions to get to the root of the problem. Reflect upon and paraphrase what your team members tell you, to show that you understand their points of view.

Use your emotional intelligence to identify the underlying cause of the conflict, and pay attention to each participant's body language to help you to get a better sense of their state of mind.

Be prepared to encounter a range of strong feelings, from fear and distress to anger, and even a wish for revenge. But avoid shutting these feelings down – this might be the first time that your team members have fully expressed what the impact of the conflict is, and it will likely give you valuable clues to its cause.

Then ask each person what they hope to gain from the mediation. Remind them that it's not about winning, but about finding a practical resolution that suits everyone who's involved.

Tip:

You may want to leave sometime between individual and joint meetings, so that each participant has time to reflect on the discussion that they've had with you and to consider their position in what might be a fresh light.

## **3. Explore the Issues Together**

Once both sides have had time to reflect, arrange a joint meeting. Open the session on a positive note, by thanking them for being open to resolving the conflict. Remind

them of the ground rules, summarize the situation, and then set out the main areas of agreement and disagreement.

Explore every issue in turn, and encourage the participants to express how they feel to one another. Make sure that they have equal time to talk, and that they can express themselves fully and without interruption. If they become defensive or aggressive, look for ways to bring the conversation back to the main problem at hand. Encourage them to empathize with one another, and to improve their understanding of one another's point of view by asking questions themselves.

Tip:

Make sure that there's an empty room close by, where people can go to have some time away from the discussion if it starts to stall or become heated. You may also want to speak with each person separately to move the discussion along. Either way, your aim is, eventually, to bring them back together again!

#### **4. Negotiate and Compromise**

Once both sides have given their views, shift their attention from the past to the future.

Go over the points that were raised in your meetings, and try to identify areas where they have at least some shared opinions. Resolve these issues first, as a “quick win” will help to build positive momentum, and bolster both sides' confidence that a workable solution can be found.

Ask participants to brainstorm solutions and encourage win-win negotiation to make sure that they reach a solution that they're happy with. If a suggestion is unreasonable, ask the initiator what he would consider to be reasonable, and whether he thinks that the other party would agree

#### **5. Create a Written Agreement**

Take notes during all of the meetings that you mediate and, once the participants have reached a solution, write that up as a formal agreement. Make sure that the agreement is easy to understand and that actions are SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound).

Help to avoid any confusion or new disagreement by checking that your language is neutral, free from jargon, and clear for all. Read the agreement back to both parties to make sure that they fully understand what will be expected from them, and to clarify any points that they do not understand or that are too general or vague.

You might even consider getting each person to sign the agreement. This can add weight and finality to the outcome, and help to increase their accountability. But mediation is designed to be a relatively informal process, and you could undermine this by pushing too hard.

Tip:

Bear in mind that mediation might not always result in an agreement, despite the mediator's best efforts. In these situations, you'll likely need to go on to use a more formal procedure.

## **6. Get Some Closure**

It's time to bring the mediation to a close. Give the participants copies of the agreed statement, and clearly explain what will be expected from them once they're back in the workplace.

Take some time to prepare, together, how to overcome obstacles to implementing the agreement, and to explore options for dealing with them. Summarize the next steps, offer your continued support as a mediator, and thank both parties for their help and cooperation.

Tip:

Consider checking in with the participants informally at a later date, to make sure that they are on track with their agreement.

<https://outreach.un.org/mun/content/process-negotiation> 08/20/2019, (Steep, 2003).

Quote: "The Harder the Conflict the more Glorious the Triumph," Thomas Paine

Conclusion: Conflict is part of being alive. The effects of conflict are multi-dimensional and are intertwined in every aspect of our lives. The goal to successful leadership is to be able to use the tools available and tailor make them for the unique individuals, situations, dynamics and personalities of the people you supervise or lead. Conflict resolution skills can be learned and practiced. Every problem is an opportunity for growth. The key as a leader is to be able to reflect upon each incident or situation and evaluate yourself honestly in how you approached and resolved the conflict. It requires self-reflection that is honest and forthright. The only way one will grow as a leader is to engage regularly in this self-reflection with honest feedback from others and use the new gained knowledge to do better the next time, because there will always be another opportunity.

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