The Science Behind the Way We Work

A framework to map conflicts in your team and respond adaptively to them

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"It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent, but rather the one most responsive to change."

Charles Darwin

1.   Introduction: Understanding conflict situations

This article is related to another piece in this series about strategies to navigate (and resolve effectively) conflicts at the work (Managing conflicts for improved collaboration). It complements the advice contained in the previous article by taking a different perspective on managing conflicts. Whereas the previous article tried to look at local interventions that could be taken when handling a variety of conflicts and disagreements at work, the current one takes the bird's eye view with the aim of providing colleagues with an effective way to map the different conflict situations and find the most appropriate response to them.

The first article provided a series general "tactics" that can be used to deal with conflicts in the workplace, whereas the present one provides a structured approach to gaining a clearer understanding of the situation and determining the most suitable next move.

2.   The Challenge: The importance of adaptability in conflict management

Charles Darwin famously claimed that "it is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent, but rather the one most responsive to change". Later, Albert Einstein would echo this principle stating that "the measure of intelligence is adaptability to change".

What do these quotes have to do with conflict management? More than we may think. Indeed, research in psychology has revealed how the best way to navigate conflicts at the workplace is to respond adaptively to the type of situation faced. Stated otherwise, managers (who are usually responsible for levelling conflicts at the workplace to enhance team cohesion and improve the quality of work) as well as employees across the hierarchical structure of an organisation should

adopt different strategies depending on the specifics of the conflict type they find themselves in.

By effectively adapting to the conflict environment they inhabit, managers have therefore better chances to solve workplace conflicts, enhance their conflict resolution, and achieve higher levels of well-being at work.

3. The Science: A framework to map conflicts and respond to them effectively

Peter T. Coleman is a psychologist working at Columbia University who has devoted his career to study conflicts and the development of strategies for their optimal resolution. Through his research, conducted with many other scholars in the field, he has developed a comprehensive framework that allows the identification of the most common conflict types and of a set of strategies that align most appropriately with each specific situation[1]. The framework will be briefly summarised in the sections below.

3.1. Identifying the five most common conflict situations ACTs (Actionable Tips)

We usually have a mental representation of the situation we are in. When we face a conflict, we usually assess the situation based on three main variables:

a) Relationship
How important is this person (or group of people) for me and my professional goal?

b) Shared goals
Do we share the same goals and concerns?

c) Power differences
Who is in charge? Is there a hierarchical structure, and if so, where do I fall in relation to the other individual(s)?

These three aspects represent the fundamental components of virtually any conflict scenario.

Based on these fundamental ingredients, we can identify five most basic types of situations in which conflicts may arise:

1. Compassionate Responsibility
Your relationship is important; you are in a higher power relationship and share common goals.

2. Command and Control
Your relationship is important, you have conflicting goals, and you hold a higher position in the hierarchy.

3. Cooperative Dependence
Your relationship is important; you have complementary goals and hold a lower position in the hierarchy.

4. Unhappy Tolerance
Your relationship is important, you have conflicting goals, and you hold a lower position in the hierarchy.

5. Independence
Your relationship is relatively unimportant. Nothing else really matters in this circumstance (neither shared/competing goals nor power).

It goes without saying that the above list should not be taken as being descriptively exhaustive, but rather as a map of conflicts situations through which we can better understand the situation in which we operate, even if the conflict landscape we have to navigate does not perfectly fit the descriptions provided above.

3.2. Responding adaptively to the situation at hand: Different minsets for different conflict scenarios

Different conflicts scenarios tend to trigger different behavioural and psychological responses in the people involved in them. These responses can crucially determine the outcome of the entire conflicts dynamics and affect. Research has shown how there seems to be mindsets that are particularly fitting to better handle specific conflict situations.

[1] The following version of the framework is based on the description provided in the book Make conflicts work: Harnessing the power of disagreement (Coleman & Ferguson 2015). The version of the framework provided in this book is a further iteration of the one illustrated in a peer-reviewed article by Coleman and Kugler (Coleman &

Kugler 2014). The paragraphs below are further integrated with insights from another peer-reviewed article published by Peter Coleman and other colleagues (Coleman et al. 2012).

Based on the five scenarios illustrated in the previous section, it is possible to identify seven mindsets that are best suited to respond optimally to the conflict situation we are in:

1. Benevolence (response to Compassionate Responsibility)

This mindset involves a collaborative and mindful approach to managing conflict. The person in charge is willing to take action to disentangle the issue and encourages collective problem¬solving through open dialogues and mutual transparency.

→ Pros/Cons: On the one hand, benevolence can foster an environment of care and empowerment among employees, with likely positive consequences on both their well-being and performance. It can also contribute to strengthening team cohesion and enhancing the leadership effectiveness of the manager in charge. On the other hand, it is essential to recognize that benevolence may sometimes backfire, especially when individuals might exploit the leader's goodwill for their own selfish interest, or when they may not yet possess the requisite professional maturity to assume significant responsibility in resolving the task at hand.

2. (Constructive) Dominance (response to Command-and-Control)

This mindset involves the adoption of a direct and confrontational approach to dispute that sometimes may result as being harsh and severe. It is a more controlling approach that is mostly focused on getting the other person to do what they would not have otherwise done.

→ Pros/Cons: On the one hand, constructive dominance can turn out an effective means to reach one's goals, especially when there seems to be no other way to achieve them. On the other hand, such a mindset can prove to be one of the most detrimental approaches to conflict resolution, potentially leading to severe repercussions. It is likely to exacerbate levels of negativity and anxiety within the team, culminating with harmful effects on wellbeing and performance. It goes without saying, but worth stressing it nonetheless, that constructive dominance is not personal, but a mindset that should carefully be kept strictly within the professional perimeter.

3. Support (response to Cooperative Dependence)

This mindset involves the pursuit of clear understanding of roles and responsibilities. Individuals strive to clarify the dispute and rectify any perceived missteps in their conduct. They tend to actively ask for help to better understand what is going on. These circumstances are likely to generate some degree of anxiety and therefore employees in this circumstance highly value and appreciate a supportive and empathetic leadership.

→ Pros/Cons: On the one hand, a support mindset can foster the development of healthy long-term professional relationships. It establishes a sense of collective support that is likely to enhance performance. It also facilitates a sense of psychological safety and empowers individuals to take more risk and innovate. On the other hand, individuals should be highly aware of how they ask for clarification and disentangle the conflict situation. Individuals should seek to find ways to limit too harsh and frequent expressions of dissent in order to avoid persistent negativity without dissipating the "positivity reservoir" of the relationship. Consequently, support should be deployed thoughtfully and judiciously, rather than utilised indiscriminately.

4. Appeasement (response to Unhappy Tolerance)

This mindset involves the need to quietly tolerate a difficult situation and a conscious effort to steer clear of amplifying conflicts, with the end goal of rectifying the situation over time.

→ Pros/Cons: On the one hand, appeasement may be an effective way to keep your professional relationship with the other party when this is essential to reach your goals. Appeasement is a way to endure minor nuisances in the pursuit of a greater objective. Conversely, this mindset, when sustained over a prolonged period, can foster resentment and instigate feelings of impotence and powerlessness. Additionally, by promoting conflict avoidance rather than constructive confrontation, appeasement may deter individuals from engaging in productive dialogues that could potentially yield positive outcomes for all parties involved.

5.   Autonomy (response to Independence)

The mindset involves an understanding of the relatively lesser importance of the relationship and hence the realisation that the conflict might not be worth the effort altogether. Individuals in this situation can indeed achieve their goals through means other than the relationship in question.

→   Pros/Cons: Pros/Cons: On one hand, adopting an autonomy mindset can be beneficial particularly when the relationship at hand is not of high importance and professional objectives can be optimally achieved via other avenues. This strategy enables individuals to bypass the effort of enduring a conflict, allowing for more efficient use of psychological resources. On the other hand, such a mindset can inadvertently foster isolation. Individuals embracing this mindset may be perceived as excessively individualistic, seeming indifferent to the collective well-being and performance of the team. This perception can negatively impact interpersonal relations and overall team cohesion.

3.3. Avoid chronic mindsets and respond adaptively to conflicts.

The most important overarching lesson to draw from the framework presented is that each mindset and strategy comes with its own benefits and potential drawbacks. The studies on conflict management that we summarised in this article reveal two distinct but highly interrelated issues concerning how individuals handle conflict situations.

Firstly, people can adopt a mindset chronically, implying they tend to consistently apply one specific approach to conflict resolution, regardless of the situation at hand. For example, some individuals may resort to dominance excessively, with the risk of being perceived

(and rightly so) as unempathetic and careless leaders, which can erode team cohesion, performance, and wellbeing.

Secondly, the chronic utilization of a single mindset often results in less effective and inefficient conflict resolution strategies. Evidence indeed suggests that those employees and leaders who excel at conflict management are those who can respond adaptively to varying circumstances. They have the ability to evaluate the given situation and choose the most suitable strategy for navigating it.

The proposed framework enables individuals to do just that: it facilitates the assessment of a situation based on three key dimensions – the importance of the relationship, the balance of power, and the degree of shared goals. Using this assessment, one can select the mindset that is most appropriate for the specific scenario. This framework underscores the importance of flexibility and adaptability in conflict resolution, encouraging a more situation-dependent approach rather than a one-size-fits-all solution.

4.   ACTs (Actionable Tips)

From the sections above, we can draw the following main key pieces of advice:

❖ Try to assess the conflict situation you are in. Ask yourself the following questions: How important is this person (or group of people) for me and my professional goal? Do we share the same goals and concerns? Who is in charge?

❖ Identify the conflict situation you are in and adopt the most suitable mindset to navigate it optimally. Respond adaptively to the situation at hand.

❖ Be aware of the pros and cons of each conflict mindset: each mindset comes with its set of benefits and drawbacks and individuals should be mindful of them to make the best use of the various mindsets.

Tip for tomorrow...

.... Take the conflict intelligence self-assessment to help you better identify the situation you're in based on the variables and dimensions presented in this paper. You can find the link to the self-assessment **here**.

In a nutshell
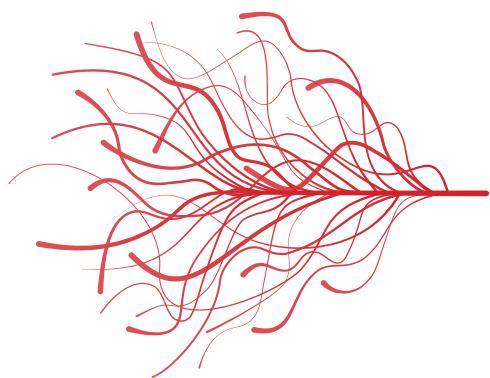
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Charles Darwin

The Challenge

Workplace conflicts are impossible to avoid. The challenge therefore does not concern how to best prevent conflicts but rather how to best navigate them.

The Science

Research in the psychology of conflict resolution has shown that the best way to resolve workplace conflicts effectively does not consist in a one-size-fits-all solution but rather in the ability to respond adaptively to the situation at hand.

The Solution

Use the framework developed by Prof. Coleman to map your conflict situation and pick the most suitable strategy to navigate it.

References

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