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James A. Wall, Jr. and Ronda Roberts Callister

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## **Conflict and Its Management**

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*This article reviews the conflict literature, first examining the causes of conflict, its core process, and its effects. Subsequently, we probe into conflict escalation (and de-escalation), contexts, and conflict management. When examining this last topic, we note that conflict can be managed by the disputants themselves, by managers, or by other third parties. In conclusion we suggest directions for future research and provide recommendations for practicing managers.*

There ain't no good guys  
There ain't no bad guys,  
There's only you and me,  
And we just disagree.

—Dave Mason

When we're in a conflict, we don't see it that way. There are good guys; there are bad guys; we don't "just disagree." Conflict—to most of us—is mighty unpleasant.

It's like the common cold. We all know what it is, but objectively analyzing it can prove difficult, as can identifying the causes and understanding the effects. And most difficult is discovering a cure.

In this article we'll undertake these tasks—for conflict. First offered will be a general overview of the conflict process, immediately followed with a definition or explanation of the construct. In subsequent sections we will delineate the causes of conflict, examine the core process, and identify its effects. Then we will look at conflict escalation and the context in which conflict takes place.

With these ideas under our belts, we'll turn to the management of conflict, closing with some suggestions for researchers and managers.

### **Conflict: General Overview**

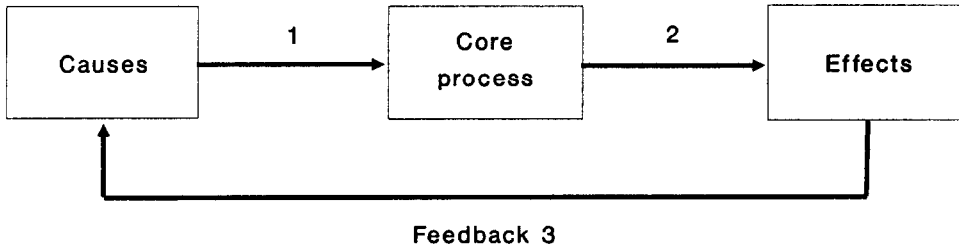
The conflict literature is mountainous; so extensive, in fact, that the references for it, even if single-spaced, would exceed the pages allocated to this article. Why? Because conflict has been with us for a long time and since early

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**Figure 1.** Conflict Cycle

literary times people have been writing about it. In the past, writers have explored conflict on five distinct levels (Deutsch, 1990). One is personal. Here the conflict is within the person. It might take the form of *person-role* conflict, whenever strong pressures from one's colleagues run counter to one's values or beliefs. Or it can be of the *inter-sender* variety, whenever different demands in a role cannot be met concurrently. Finally, personal conflict can take the form of *inter-role* conflict. (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek & Rosenthal, 1964). In this situation, conflict arises because the individual occupies more than one role (e.g., principal and mother) and finds that some demands from each role cannot be met simultaneously.

At the interpersonal level an individual comes into conflict with others. As the name suggests, intergroup conflict is conflict between or among groups. Interorganizational conflict is between or among organizations. And international, between or among nations. In this review we will concentrate on interpersonal, intergroup and interorganizational conflicts, drawing from the other two planes when we believe findings in these three arenas can be generalized.

The conflicts at each of these levels, scholars appear to agree, share a generic format (Figure 1). As with any social process, there are causes; also, there is a core process which has results or effects. These effects feed back to affect the causes. Such a conflict cycle takes place within a context (environment) and the cycle will flow through numerous iterations.

The model provided here is a general one that indicates how the major pieces in the conflict puzzle fit together. It is selected because we agree with Blalock's (1989) contention that knowledge cumulates systematically when particular conflicts are described and analyzed in a reasonably common framework. Such a tack is preferable, he feels, to maintaining that every conflict contains so many idiosyncratic features that it must be studied individually or grouped solely with others of its type.

### *Other Reviews*

Over the years a number of scholarly reviews of the conflict literature have been published, and we encourage the reader seeking more details to consult them. Our suggestion is that the Pondy (1967), Thomas (1976), Thomas (1992),

Putnam and Poole (1987) Lewicki, Weiss and Lewin (1992), Morrill (1989) and van de Vliert (in press) articles be read in the presented sequence. Quite readable, the Pondy (1967) article makes two noteworthy contributions: first it outlines stages of conflict episodes; secondly, it develops a general theory of organizational conflict.

Thomas' earlier article (1976) focuses on dyadic conflict, while developing two models of conflict: (1) a process model that outlines the dynamics of conflict; and (2) a structural one that considers underlying and environmental influences on conflict. In his later article, Thomas (1992) focuses more on long-term improvements in conflict management.

While highlighting the importance of communications in conflict, Putnam and Poole (1988) provide thorough coverage of three conflict levels—interpersonal, intergroup and interorganizational. Lewicki, Weiss and Lewin (1992) identify and categorize models of conflict, negotiation, and third-party processes. Morrill (1989) notes that in recent years, the research has shifted from how conflict should be handled to how conflict is handled, and van de Vliert (in press) focuses on the escalation and de-escalation of conflict.

### *Conflict: A Definition*

Each of the preceding reviews contributes its definition of the process. In general, these definitions hold that **conflict is a process in which one party perceives that its interests are being opposed or negatively affected by another party.**

A somewhat thorough perusal of the literature reveals most definitions (Fink, 1968) agree that conflict is a process involving two or more parties. Likewise, there's agreement that a party, for there to be conflict, must perceive the opposition of the other.

Admittedly, there is some divergence of opinion as to what the "other" is opposing. Thomas (1976) indicates that the party's "concerns" or "something cared about" (Thomas, 1992) is opposed. Putnam and Poole (1987) cite other's interference with the party's goods, aims, and values. Donohue and Kolt (1992) refer to needs or interests; whereas, Pruitt and Rubin (1986) discuss aspirations. And Deutsch (1980) talks about "activities."

Since concerns, something cared about, goals, aims, values, interests and aspirations are rather closely akin, we are comfortable with a definition specifying that the other, in a conflict, is blocking the party's interest(s) or goal(s). With tentative agreement on this definition, let us turn to the causes of conflict.

### **Causes of Conflict**

In the past twenty-five years researchers have not concentrated on finding causes (Deutsch, 1990). However, there have been adequate empirical studies, theoretic pieces, and astute observations that allow us to enumerate them.

If you reflect on the definition of conflict, it seems to indicate several logical groupings of causes. Because a party and other are involved in the conflict, some of the causes would stem from the characteristics of each.

**Table 1.** Causes of Conflict

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**Individual Characteristics**

Personality  
 Values  
 Goals  
 Commitment to position  
 Stress  
 Anger  
 Desire for autonomy

**Interpersonal Factors****Perceptual Interface**

Perception that other has high goals  
 Other's intentions counter to party's  
 Other's intentions counter to party's fairness norms  
 Other's behavior seen as harmful  
 Distrust of other  
 Misunderstanding

**Communications**

Distortions and misunderstandings  
 Hostility  
 Dislikes  
 High goals  
 Insults  
 Intended distributive behavior

**Behavior**

Reduction of party's (other's) outcomes  
 Blocking party's goals  
 Low interaction  
 Power struggles

**Structure**

Closeness  
 Power imbalances  
 Creation of interdependence  
 Distributive relationship  
 Status differences  
 Preferential treatment of one side  
 Symbols

**Previous Interactions**

Past failures to reach agreement  
 Past history of conflict  
 Locked-in conflict behaviors  
 Other results of conflict

**Issues**

Complex vs. simple  
 Multiple vs. few  
 Vague vs. clear  
 Principled  
 Size  
 Divisibility

---

The interpersonal relationship between these disputants, however, holds the more numerous causes. First there are perceptual factors, such as distrust of each other. Second—as Robbins (1978) and Putnam and Poole (1987) note—there are communication factors. Also we find behavioral, structural and “previous interaction” causes. And there is the impact of issues.

Using Table 1, which lays out the above typology, we will delineate many of these causes. For succinctness, we’ll leave some to the readers’ individual reconnoitering.

### *Individual Characteristics*

There is some evidence that personality characteristics can generate conflict; for example, Baron (1989) found that individuals with a Type-A personality report a higher frequency of conflict with subordinates than do Type-B’s. However, reviews of the negotiation literature by Thompson (1990) and Wall and Blum (1991) both revealed that personality and other individual differences, such as attitudes, had a very minor impact on negotiations. An extrapolation from these findings leads us to the conclusion that they would have a relatively minor impact on conflict. Wrightman’s (1966) finding that only one out of his 12 scales measuring personality and attitude variables showed any effect on competitive game behavior supports this conclusion.

Turning to personal values, we find stronger effects. As Augsburger (1992), Hahm (1986), and others note, individuals in various societies value conflict very differently. Some, especially those in western cultures, view it as a part, perhaps even a beneficial part, of life. Others, particularly those from Korean or Japanese (Lebra, 1976) cultures feel that conflict is, by definition, bad and should be avoided. Consequently, these latter parties are less apt to initiate conflict.

Turning to goals, we find several aspects of these will initiate conflict. First, if a person’s goal is to engage in conflict or competition with the other, then such a goal is apt to generate conflict (Wong, Tjosvold & Lee, 1992). Also when goals (aspirations) are high (because of a person’s past achievements, perceived power, societal norms, peers’ accomplishments, etc.), a person is more apt to come into conflict with another (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986). Even moderate goals, if rigid, (e.g., the goal to avoid humiliation) can generate conflict (Kaplowitz, 1990).

Such reasoning also lies at the heart of most “economic” theories of conflict (Coombs & Avrunin, 1988). That is, if there is some level of interdependence between party and other, one party’s goal attainment will usually generate conflict because the goal achievement is at the cost of the other’s outcomes.

Consistent with the goal effects are those generated by commitment to position. If the party (or other) has a high goal and is highly committed to achieving it, then conflict is quite likely. On the other hand, if commitment to the goal is low, so are the chances of conflict.

Taking a more emotional tack, we can point out that stress and anger are sources of conflict. Stress, Derr (1978) notes, produces a tenseness in the individual; a tenseness that can boil over into conflict with another. Anger runs

a similar route. An individual's, group's, firm's, or nation's anger and frustration too often have a tendency to depredate the relationship with others.

Finally, an individual's desire for autonomy will generate conflict, but only when it is pitted against another's—organization's, individual's, firm's or nation's—need or requirement for interdependence (Evans, 1987). For example, a worker might possess a high degree for autonomy. In and of itself, this preference does not generate conflict; however, if the worker's peers depend upon her to operate and maintain the firm's computer system, they are likely to make demands, such as being at work by 8 a.m. and responding within 5 minutes to calls for assistance, that infringe upon the worker's autonomy and thereby set the stage for conflict with her.

### *Interpersonal Factors*

The above example indicates that the relationship between two parties is at times the well-spring of the conflict. As Table 1 indicates, this relationship is composed of several distinct facets: the perceptual interface, likewise the communication, behavioral, structural relationships, and the previous interactions. Consider first the perceptual interface.

**Perceptual interface.** A primary force in this grouping is the perception that the other has high goals (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986). This perception typically generates conflict because the party expects that other's success in attaining her goals will be costly to the party's own goals. Many times this latter perception is a very accurate one, but at times it is incorrect (Kaplowitz, 1990).

Complementing this cause is the party's interpretation of the other's intentions. These are most apt to spawn conflict whenever the other's intentions are viewed as counter to the party's payoffs (Kuenne 1989; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986; Winter, 1987), whenever they appear to violate the party's norms of fairness (Aram & Salipante, 1981), equity (Wall & Nolan, 1987) and when the other's behavior seems deliberately designed to hurt the party in some way.

**Communications.** The effects of communications are double-edged. Low communication, on the one hand, results in low knowledge of others and may underpin coordination difficulties. These, in turn, lead to conflict (Pondy, 1967). On the other hand extensive communication between party and other is generally agreed to be a ripe source for misunderstanding and resultant conflict (see Putnam & Poole, 1987 for a detailed review). Too often one's words, facial expressions, body language, and speech lead to attributions of intent, that in turn spawn conflict (Thomas & Pondy 1977). This phenomenon can take place within any culture, and it runs rampant in cross-cultural communication (Augsburger, 1992).

Communication-based misunderstanding becomes especially prevalent if the other is angry, dislikes, or distrusts the party. Or a history of interpersonal difficulties can too readily set the stage for miscommunication.

Accurate, lucid communication can just as readily generate conflict when it conveys criticism, especially the inconsiderate, destructive variety (Baron, 1988b, 1990), high individual goals, threats, intended distributive behavior, insults, etc.



**Behavior.** Turning to the behavioral sources of conflict, we find that reduction of a person's outcomes by another is an unequivocal source of conflict. Likewise, blocking of the person's goals, outcomes, or aspirations is apt to generate conflict (Alter, 1990). Unless it is concealed or misunderstood in some way, such actions clearly foment conflict. Such acts can be inadvertent, as when a young Chinese woman shames her family by bringing home a boyfriend who hails from a feuding clan (Hong, 1990). Or they can be intentional, as the Cuban blockade or a union's picket.

Consider also the effect of the interaction level between the potential disputants. Most of the literature supports the proposition that moderate amounts of interaction are preferable to infrequent interaction. The latter, it seems, contributes to negative perceptions of other, misinterpretation of other's incentives and the general stereotype of other as an opponent.

However, as the mediation literature reveals (Kressel & Pruitt, 1989) once conflict is ignited, low levels of communication (i.e., separation of the parties) might be preferable to moderate or high levels. The reasoning here is that a low level allows time to pass without accretion of emotions, name calling, hostile demands, etc. Likewise it provides some slack for clear thinking, and it allows each side to back down sans face-loss.

Shifting to another cause, we find power struggles to be rather prevalent sources of conflict (Blalock, 1989). The reduction of one's power by the other can engender conflict (Ferguson & Cooper, 1987; Horwitz, 1956). Or the primary woof and warp in the process can be attempts of one party to control the other and the other's resistance to the control (Phillips & Cheston, 1978; Renwick, 1975b).

**Structure.** Within families, informal groups, formal ones, firms, governments, and international arenas, we find that laws, norms, customs, technical or production requirements, agreements, etc. establish the structure of the relationship. For example, marriage sets a reciprocal relationship between a husband and wife. The technical requirements of an amniocentesis procedure establishes interdependence between the doctor drawing the embryonic fluid and the geneticist who tests it. Likewise the structural requirements dictate that the doctor draw the fluid first and that the time interval between the fluid withdrawal and the genetic test be somewhat minimal.

How does such structuring influence conflict? A somewhat ironic effect comes from closeness. The closer and safer people feel to one another, the more apt they are to raise annoying issues (Ephross & Vassil, 1993). A more intuitively clear effect comes from power imbalance. If structure creates power imbalances, and the weaker party resists the stronger influence, or sees conflict as a way of increasing power then conflict will probably result (Assael, 1969, Peterson, 1983).

The most potent effect of structure comes from its creation of interdependence between/among the parties. Such interdependence can restrict or redirect the parties' behavior, aspirations, or outcomes and thereby generate conflict. This effect is amplified when the interdependence is tandem with divergent goals (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967; Putnam & Wilson, 1982; Thomas,

1976; Walton & Dutton, 1969; White, 1961; Zald, 1962). And conflict is very likely to occur when the interdependence is accompanied by differing perceptions as well as by divergent goals (March & Simon, 1958). Interdependence *with third parties* (e.g., with bosses) can also generate conflict between party and other. In this process, the third parties' disputes,—because of loyalties, role demands, or modeling effects—can be transplanted to the party-other relationship (Smith, 1989).

Structure most often assures conflict when it establishes a distributive relationship; that is, one in which a party's gain comes at the expense of the other (Walton, Dutton & Cafferty, 1969; Walton, Dutton & Fitch, 1966). In this condition, conflict seems assured unless party or other is highly benevolent, resources are high, time frames differ, or party and other do not perceive the nature of the relationship.

While some structures beget conflicts, others prevent or aid in its management. For example a structure that creates superordinate goals will have this latter effect (Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood & Sherif, 1961) as will structures that increase the strength of the ties between groups (Nelson, 1989). Other structures that create collaborative incentives and conditions for joint success (Thomas, 1992) can also prevent conflict.

**Previous interactions.** When considering the previous interactions between party and other, we shift to a more dynamic gear. In every relationship there is a starting point and at that point there has been no previous interaction/relationship which has causal effects. Past that point, however, previous interactions can begin to impact on the present (Tjosvold & Chia, 1989), generating conflict. For instance, past failures to reach agreement, especially if the failures became emotion-laden, engender new conflicts or generate prejudice and stereotypes (Sherif et.al., 1961) between party and other.

More insidiously, conflicts tend to continue (Smith & Simmons, 1983) or a past history of conflict generates self-fulfilling expectations of new ones.

### *Issues*

When parties come into conflict, it is usually over some issue(s), big ones, small ones, emotional, substantive, (Walton, 1987) simple or complex. Which of the issue characteristics generate conflict? One is "complexity." Complex issues are more apt to lead to conflict than are simple ones. And multiple (versus a few) issues also more often spawn conflict. The explanation in both cases is rather clear: complex and multiple issues are more likely to generate misunderstanding, to tap divergent interests or unearth dissimilar goals.

A point that might not be so intuitively clear, however, is that while these characteristics generate conflict, they concomitantly make the conflict solvable. Most often we assume that causes of conflicts will serve to make them intractable. For these two causes, this is not the case.

First consider multiple issues. The multiplicity does increase the chances for goals to generate conflict; yet, once there is conflict, the multiple issues provide an opportunity for the parties to set trades and face-saving exits from the conflict.

Complex issues operate in a similar fashion. They generate conflict via tension and confusion. But complex issues can often be dissected into a number of smaller/simpler ones, which in turn can be traded. An analogous argument could also be made for vague issues.

While issues with the above characteristics may generate a resolution as well as the conflict, several characteristics do not; rather, they generate and perpetuate conflict. Issues of principle or non-negotiable needs are in the forefront of this category (Fisher, 1994; Rouhana & Kelman, 1994). On such issues (e.g., abortion or security), parties become emotionally bonded to their positions, and once into conflict over them, the disputants find that trades, reciprocal give and take, are quite difficult.

Large, nondivisible issues tend to follow the same route. Because such issues (e.g., does a proposed expressway cut through the slums?) entail high stakes (e.g., a neighborhood is destroyed, or an expressway is canceled or rerouted), the opposing parties hold strongly to their positions and enter conflict. Once in the conflict, the all-or-nothing characteristic of the issue makes palatable, face-saving, piece-meal trades quite difficult to ferret out.

### **Conflict: The Core Process**

Given that conflict has causes, what is the core process itself? Most researchers agree it is the interpersonal behavior in which one or both disputants oppose the counterpart's interests/goals.

Thomas' (1992) mulling of this core is somewhat complex and quite cognitively-oriented. In his sequencing, a party realizes that another is (or will) negatively affecting his position. After considering how to deal with the other and experiencing some emotional surge, the party decides what he intends to do and takes action. The other—after awareness, thoughts, emotions, and plans—reacts to the party's behavior. Conflict then is under way as the party counters the other's reaction.

Walton's (1969) description is more parsimonious. For him, issues (causes) lead to expressed feelings and conflict behavior, subsequently to a triggering event. These two models seem to set the end points on a complex-simple continuum, with most other descriptions of the "core conflict" falling between them.

### **Effects of Conflict**

Having looked at the conflict causes and its core process, we now turn to its effects. In doing so, we find that the effects can be classified in ways that are similar to the causes. Specifically, there are effects on individuals, on the relationships or communications, behaviors, structure, and issues. An additional category is the residues of the conflict.

#### *Effects on Individuals*

Perhaps the most frequent consequence of conflict is upset parties (Bergman & Volkema, 1989). This can be manifest in a number of ways such as anger, feelings of hostility (Thomas, 1976), social-emotional separation

(Retzinger, 1991), tension (Thomas, 1976), anxiety (Ephross & Vassil, 1993), and stress, but at low levels of intensity disputants may also find conflict stimulating or exhilarating (Filley, 1978; Thomas, 1976).

Negative emotions can lead in turn to personal frustrations (Thomas, 1976; Chesler, Crowfoot & Bryant, 1978), low job satisfaction (Derr, 1978; Filley, 1978; Robbins, 1978), reduced motivation and performance (Bergman & Volkema, 1989).

### *Interpersonal Relationship*

**Perceptual interface.** Since the opponent in conflict is viewed as blocking a person's goals—and thereby generating the conflict—the anger, stress and other negative emotions quickly generate less-than-affable perceptions of him or her. As most of us have experienced, these perceptions include distrust of the opponent (Thomas, 1976; Deutsch, 1973, 1990, 1993; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986), misunderstandings, perceiving the opponent's behavior as harmful, the inability to see the opponent's perspective (Blake & Mouton, 1984), and questioning the opponent's intentions. During and after conflict, attitudes towards the opponent generally become more negative (Bergman & Volkema, 1989).

**Communications.** Both the quality and amount of communication may change as a result of conflict. As for quality, the communication tends to become more hostile, possibly including insults, distortions and misunderstandings. The amount of communication may either increase (Bergman & Volkema, 1989; Sternberg & Dobson, 1987; van de Vliert, 1990) or decrease (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986; Thomas, 1976). Conflict may motivate disputants to air issues (Robbins, 1974) or to clam up, avoiding the opponent (Bergman & Volkema, 1989). Conflict may also increase communications with people not directly involved in the conflict as the disputants discuss the situation with co-workers or outsiders (Bergman & Volkema, 1989).

**Behavior.** The overt interactions between the disputants are the most visible aspect of conflict. These can range from relatively passive actions such as avoiding others (Bergman & Volkema, 1989; Sternberg & Dobson, 1987; van de Vliert, 1990) to defensive responses such as face-saving tactics (Ting-Toomey, Gao, Trubisky, Tang, Kim, Lin & Nishids, 1991), venting emotions (Thomas, 1992) and confrontation (Morrill & Thomas, 1992). More hostile acts include threats, physical force (Sternberg & Dobson, 1987; Sternberg & Soriano, 1984; van de Vliert, 1990), harming others (Thomas, 1976), coercion, disorder, and protest (Schelling, 1960). Over the longer term, conflict can lead to low commitments to decision implementations (Derr, 1978; Filley, 1978), as well as to increased absenteeism, more grievances and reduced productivity (Lewin, 1987; Pondy, 1967; Robbins, 1978; Tjosvold, 1991).

**Structure.** When the conflict occurs between groups or organizations, we are likely to see effects within their structures such as shifts in leadership to a more autocratic or authoritarian style (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986). Conflict may also be accompanied by increased focus on the activities of the group and less concern for individual satisfaction. And groups, in general, become more internally cohesive.

The structural relationship between groups (or individuals) also changes as a result of conflict. For a number of reasons, there is a decreased interdependence and coordination between groups. Groups, because of conflict, can develop contentious goals (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986) as well as increased discrimination between groups and greater favoritism toward the in-group (Bettencourt, Brewer, Crook & Miller, 1992). Also contributing to the decreased interdependence are the cognitive distortions regarding the other group, person, or organization (Cosier, Dalton & Taylor, 1991).

### *Issues*

Through an objective lens it would appear that issues do not change as a result of conflict. Yet we all know they change, subjectively and even objectively. When people, groups or firms move into conflict, simple issues become complex; few issues begin to give rise to a host of others. Clarity falls victim to misunderstandings that cloud the issues. Disputes become more difficult to resolve as tradeable issues become matters of principle.

Part of this metamorphosis in issues is due to subjective perceptions: an issue that normally would seem simple becomes clouded when viewed by adversaries. On the other hand some is due to objective changes: simple issues, for example, *do* become complex as linkages and new issues surface during a conflict. For example, in a dispute between a delivery and manufacturing firm, the issue of which building is to receive a piece of heavy equipment quickly expands to include the issue of who will unload the equipment and when it is to be inspected for damages.

### *Resolutions and Residues*

As it unfolds, conflict produces a distinct set of products; one of these can be a resolution, which may be in the form of an explicit or tacit agreement. Likewise, there can be explicit and tacit deadlocks, or simple tolerance of the conflict and the opponent (Derr, 1978; Eiseman, 1978). For any of these, the outcomes can be integrative (with both sides benefiting), or distributive (with one side benefiting at the other's expense).

With or without resolution, conflict can produce very negative residues. As noted previously, the parties can suffer frustration, mutual distrust, lack of commitment, physical harm, etc. For the surrounding context and its occupants, there can also be negative fallouts. These can be as minor as having to listen to the disputants' complaints. Or they can be major, such as having to bury the dead warriors or having to cope with millions of their refugees.

While most of its effects are deleterious, conflict can have positive results. At moderate levels, it is thought to improve group efficiency and productivity (Chesler et al., 1978; Derr, 1978). This seems especially true for nonroutine tasks (Jehn, 1993). It can stimulate creativity, improve the quality of decisions (Cosier & Dalton, 1990) challenge old ideas, develop greater awareness of latent problems and at times more accurately (re)frame issues. Personal development, better self-awareness and learning (Tjosvold, 1991; Touval, 1992) can also take place. It can inspire the change and adaptation necessary for organizational

survival (Robbins, 1974, 1978). Or a mid-level conflict might defuse more serious ones (Coser, 1956).

Even at the extreme level, conflict (i.e., war or violence) can have a positive effect by resolving issues which, if left smoldering, would have more dire long-run consequences.

Some of the above findings have led various writers to propose that too little conflict is as dysfunctional as too much. The literature simply does not support this assertion. Also some writers have advocated that leaders create conflict in order to perpetuate the leader's or the organization's goals. Again the literature does not support such a suggestion, and we feel writers should refrain from making such pronouncements. The effects expected from moderate conflict—namely creativity, problem awareness, adaptation and self-awareness—can be better achieved through other means. More importantly the downside risks of creating conflict are substantial; not only does conflict have significant negative effects, it also has a pernicious tendency to escalate.

### *Short Recapitulation and Road Sign*

To this point we have presented a general overview of conflict, to find that it exists at various levels, that it has multiple causes and equally extensive results. Now we probe into the more interesting aspects of conflict: its escalation, context, and management.

## **Conflict Escalation and De-escalation**

Like many social, physiological, biological, and mechanical processes, conflict does cycle over time: that is, its effects alter the original causes or generate new ones. These causes, in turn, continue to ignite the process. As you examine the "Conflict Effects" in Table 2, along with the "Conflict Causes" in Table 1, you can envision how these cycles might unfold. For example, a sales manager's anger resulting from a conflict over the advertising budget can feed back to strengthen her commitment to her position (an original cause of the conflict) and thereby reignite the conflict. Or in a dispute between a design engineer and a production foreman, distrust resulting from the original dispute could foster a subsequent one, even though distrust was not originally a conflict cause. Cycles such as these not only perpetuate the conflict, they at times can develop into an escalation.

### *Escalation*

While there are various definitions of conflict escalation, it is typically thought of as a process of increased intensity or worsening of the conflict. Pruitt and Rubin (1986) point out that this intensity is characterized with: (1) tactics going from light to heavy; (2) proliferation of issues; (3) the parties' becoming increasingly absorbed in the struggle; and (4) goal shifts, from self-advancement to subverting or punishing the other.

Escalation can evolve along a variety of routes. It can unfold in a cycle or spiral wherein one side's contentious behaviors encourage or foster those



**Table 2.** Effects of Conflict

---

**Effects on Individuals**

Anger  
 Hostility  
 Frustration  
 Tension  
 Stress  
 Feel guilty  
 Exhilaration  
 Low job satisfaction  
 Reduced motivation and productivity  
 Loss of face/embarrassment

**Interpersonal Relationship****Perceptual Interface**

Distrust  
 Misunderstandings  
 Perceiving other's behavior as harmful  
 Inability to see other's perspective  
 Questioning of other's intentions  
 Changed attitude towards other  
 Changes in relative amounts of power

**Communications**

Changes in the quality of communication  
 Changes in the amount of communication taking place

**Behavior**

Avoid other  
 Try to save face  
 Emotional venting  
 Threat-coerciveness  
 Aggression  
   Physical force  
   Harm/Injury  
 Turnover-quit or fired  
 Absenteeism  
 Biased or selective perceptions  
 Simplified, stereotyped, black/white or zero-sum thinking  
 Discounting or augmenting of information  
 Deindividualization or demonizing of others  
 Shortened time perspective  
 Fundamental attribution error  
 Increased commitment to position  
 Creativity  
 Challenge to status quo  
 Greater awareness of problem  
 Personal development  
 Learning

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*(continued)*

**Table 2.** (Continued)

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Structure
Leadership shift to authoritarian when threatened
Increased focus on activities and less on individual satisfaction
Enhanced in-group loyalty and cohesiveness
Discrimination against out-group
Contentious group goals
Increased motivation and performance within each group
Reduced interdependence or cooperation
Stability can increase or decrease
Issues
Increasing complexity
Increase in the number of issues
Clouding
Becoming matters of principle
Linkage of issues
Resolutions and Residues
Agreement-Explicit or tacit
Deadlock-Explicit or tacit
Integrative resolution
Distributive resolution
Compromise
Change
Accommodation (or both give up)
Avoiding other(s)
Fatalism or resignation

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of the other (Fisher, 1990; Glasl, 1982; Patchen, 1988; van de Vliert, 1984). This is referred to as the "spiral" model; when one side is labelled as the aggressor, it is referred to as the "aggressor-defender" model.

Escalation can also transpire as the conflict produces structural changes that perpetuate and intensify the conflict (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986). These changes can come from one disputant, as when one side starts to perceive the other as the enemy, one who should be beaten. The changes can come, instead from within the group; for example, hawks can replace doves as the group leaders. Or the structural changes can develop in the surrounding environment, as when alliances form to support the disputants and thereby escalate the conflict.

The spiral, aggressor-defender, and structural explanations indicate that escalation evolves within the party-other interactions. But, it can result, just as easily, from one side's ratcheting up the intensity (Smoke, 1977).

While the definition of escalation and the process through which it unfolds are well understood, its causes are less than clear. What precipitates escalation? This question unfortunately has drawn more speculation than research.

Some theorists have provided a predestination answer. As Fisher (1990) points out, many hold that conflict has a strong predisposition to escalate. That is, the initial and residual causes of the conflict form a solid base for its escalation; then the disputants' interactions nudge it along. Deutsch (1990), with his "crude law of social relations" is the primary member of this school. He



**Table 3.** Causes of Escalation and De-Escalation

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Causes of Escalation
Predestination: conflicts have a predisposition to escalate
General conditions
Cultural differences
History of antagonism
Parties unaware of potential costs
Parties not concerned with costs
No limit on actions
Insecure self images
Uncertain status differences
Poor socialization
No experience with crises
Weak social bonds
Mild power advantage
Perceive power advantage
Motivations to win or not to lose
Uncertainty
Lack of identification with other
Festering resentment
Inability to escape conflict
Long, injurious stalemate
Specific causes
Party's goal of escalation
Goal of complete victory
Goal of hurting other
Perception that escalation has high payoff
Perception that escalation is leverage for change
Rising stakes
Blunders
Frustrations
Need to save face
Causes of De-escalation
Anticipated common enemy
Stalemates (after escalation)
Fatigue
Recent or impending catastrophe
Time lapses
One side's voluntary yielding
Shift in goals
A step to cool opponents' anger
An indication that one isn't evil
A step to cool tensions
Signal that de-escalation is wanted

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feels that the competitive relationship between people tends to elicit overt competition, and this in turn tends to escalate into destructive conflict. Escalation continues and worsens as the parties see no way of withdrawing without suffering high losses.

Deutsch's (1990) predisposition explanation is rather explicit. Other authors (e.g., Retzinger, 1991; Baron, 1984) more implicitly support this

approach when they indicate the causes of escalation and conflict are one and the same, or when they refer simultaneously to "the causes of conflict and its escalation." Assertions that conflict has a life of its own (O'Neill, 1986) also imply that escalation automatically evolves from conflict, as do comments that conflict unfolds independent of cause (Thompson, 1989), or that conflict has a built-in tendency to escalate (Rubin, Kim & Peretz, 1990).

Most authors seem to prefer the contingency (versus the predestination) explanation of escalation, and their explanations tend to fall into two categories: general conditions under which escalation is apt to occur and specific causes of the escalation.

Consider first the general conditions that facilitate escalation (Table 3). According to Fisher (1990), escalation is more likely when there are cultural differences between the sides or whenever they have experienced a history of antagonism. Such a history, can actually socialize people toward conflict escalation (Ember & Ember, 1994). Escalation is also more likely when the parties are *unaware* of its potential, when they are not concerned about its consequences, or when their actions are not limited in some manner (Schelling, 1960).

According to Pruitt and Rubin (1986) there are additional conditions providing fertile ground for escalation: parties with insecure self images; uncertain status differences between groups; parties who are poorly socialized; those who lack experiences with crises. Examining the reverse side of the coin, Pruitt and Rubin (1986) hold that strong bonds—because they are a source of stability in relationships—reduce the likelihood of escalation. Morrill and Thomas' (1992) work, however, finds the opposite; that peers with strong ties are more likely to escalate and those with weaker ties do not. The latter group, instead of escalating, handles the conflicts covertly themselves or rely on third parties.

An addition to these escalatory conditions is the mild discrepancy in power, in which the more powerful side attempts to dominate only to find the weaker side unwilling to capitulate (Hornstein, 1965). Similar results occur when *both* sides perceive they have power over the opponent (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986). Uncertainty also spawns escalation because disputants tend to cope with current uncertainty by optimistically evaluating the payoffs of escalation (O'Neill, 1986).

***Some adjunct provisoes:*** a lack (or loss) of identification with the other person sets the stage for escalation (Retzinger, 1991) as does a festering resentment (Pruitt & Carnevale, 1993) or inability to exit the conflict; a long or injurious stalemate (Touval & Zartman, 1985) fosters escalation as the disputants attempt to extricate themselves.

Shifting from general to specific causes of escalation, we find the simplest one is that a party enters the conflict with a goal of escalation. Subsequently, at some juncture within the conflict, he does escalate, more or less assuring the opponent's retaliation. The party may pursue escalation because he views it as a means for attaining outcomes, or he may simply want to beat the opponent (Brockner, Nathanson, Friend, Harbecks, Samuelson, Houser, Bazerman & Rubin, 1984).

If both parties have the latter orientation, we find an escalation cause depicted by Fisher (1990): a pairing of disputants who both have a "totalist" strategy. In this event, each side, because it has developed or maintained this strategy, aims for complete victory over the opponent on the basic issues and attempts to eliminate or subordinate the opponent.

The goal to escalate or beat the opponent may be an original one, or as Smoke (1977) points out it can come as a shift. In a conflict, parties on occasion lose sight of the original reasons for the conflict. Concomitantly, they shift to a goal of winning, beating the other side, or ensuring that they reduce their own losses. Such a shift can have a rational base or it can be emotional. In the latter condition, one side may lose sight of all reasoning, goals, outcomes, personal costs, opponent's probable reactions, and shift to the goal of coercing and hurting the other.

While the above causes underpin some escalations, the most dominant and potent factor is the disputants' perception that remaining in the conflict and escalating it have higher payoffs (outcomes minus costs) than not doing so (Fisher, 1990; Rubin & Brockner, 1975; van de Vliert, 1984). Several specific explanations fall under this general umbrella. Kahn (1965) for instance, maintains that nations escalate to prevent something worse from happening. Smoke (1977) and Leininger (1989) hold that parties escalate because they feel this step increases their chances of winning; it decreases the chances of losing; or it constrains the opponent by demonstrating resoluteness, now and in the future (O'Neill, 1986). Some parties escalate because they view escalation as a lever for desirable changes (Glasl, 1982) such as removing barriers for advancement, for locating new allies, or for strengthening of their positions (van de Vliert, 1984). Just as perceived payoffs spawn escalation, so do increased or rising stakes (Smoke, 1977). As stakes rise, because of events indigenous or external to the conflict, so does the desire (and the attempts) to win it all, or to avoid suffering a major loss.

Most of the conditions and causes presented above presume that the disputants' escalations are goal-oriented or rationally based. As a realistic counterweight to this perspective, we point out that many escalations result from blunders. Consider some of these: one side can unintentionally insult the other or verbally attack him in the presence of a third party (Donohue, 1991). Similarly, a disputant can misread tacts, symbols or cues from the opponent (Agnew, 1989). She may become impatient and draw erroneous conclusions. She can entrap herself, or even worse, corner the opponent. She might not realize her limits (or weakness) or may force a premature confrontation with an opponent who has staying (or slaying) power (Darling & Cornesky, 1987).

**Another blunder:** one side can misperceive a step taken by the opponent or there can be misperceptions as to a maneuver the opposing side took to improve its position (Smoke, 1977). Akin to the effects of such misperceptions are those of miscommunications or the severance of communication (Fisher, 1990). In these cases, uncertainty increases, fears escalate, mistrust rises and consequently escalation unfolds.

Blunders generate escalation; so do emotions. For instance, frustrations with the opponent or with the conflict yield contentious behaviors (van de Vliert, 1984) as do embarrassments and the need to save face (Retzinger, 1991, van de Vliert, 1984).

### *De-Escalation*

Having dealt at some length with escalation, let's turn to de-escalation. This process has received *inadequate* theoretical, empirical, and practical attention. Such inattention flies in the face of reality, in that most conflicts do de-escalate; that is, they move toward states of decreased intensity. De-escalation is usually a goal of the disputants because most recognize the high costs of conflict. And perhaps even a few appreciate Osgood's (1962) observation that de-escalation when properly employed will gain an opponent's compliance.

Given the prevalence (and value) of de-escalation, it seems worthwhile to examine the process, attempting to understand and foster it. An important foundation for such an audit is the recognition that de-escalation is *not* the reverse of escalation. That is, de-escalation does not return the disputants, issues, or situation to their former states any more than dousing a raging campfire returns the heat, gases, smoke, flame, and charcoal to wood and the initial flame.

With this in mind, we can note that a number of conditions do promote de-escalation (Table 3). One is anticipation of a common enemy (Pruitt, 1969). Another is a stalemate, wherein one or both disputants have tried escalation and found it has been too costly (Patchen, 1988); therefore, they tend to contemplate the benefits and costs of de-escalating. Fatigue seems to have the same effect (Blalock, 1989), as does a recent or impending catastrophe (Pruitt & Olczak, in press). Also, time lapses allow the disputants to reflect on the costs of the escalations and revalue the goals of the original conflict (Kreisberg, 1984).

More specific causes of de-escalation include yielding or an act of conciliation by one side (Peterson, 1983). This will de-escalate the conflict if it is nonforced, if it does not signal a weakness, and if it does not closely follow a contentious move by the opponent. Sometimes simple inaction has the same effect (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986).

A shift in goals (brought forth by a disputant or a third party) from hurting to beating to winning will typically move the conflict toward de-escalation. Also it is productive for both sides to shift tactics to a problem-solving or negotiation mode (Patchen, 1988; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986). However, for only one side to do so gives the opponent a strategic advantage and may enhance the escalation.

Finally and most importantly, an effective method of de-escalation is for one side to take a step that reduces the other's anger, that signals one is not diabolical, or that reduces the tension between the parties. As examples, an apology often cools anger; discussing mundane problems reveals a disputant's humanity, and predictable behavior (e.g., Osgood's GRIT proposal) reduces tension.

When beginning this attenuated coverage of de-escalation, we tendered one admonition, de-escalation should not be thought of as the opposite of escalation. We now close with a second admonition, the goal of de-escalation is conflict

reduction or elimination, not conflict stabilization. Stable, smoldering conflicts have a calamitous propensity to persist and over time to be as detrimental as those that escalate.

### Context

The discussion of the conflict causes, its effects, the core process, and its escalation logically underpins the next topic: the context of the conflict. This subject has been approached from four different perspectives: as (1) a description of the conflict setting; (2) a reference to the independent variables; (3) the field or environment in which the conflict is embedded; and (4) the structural level or paradigm of the conflict. Let's consider each.

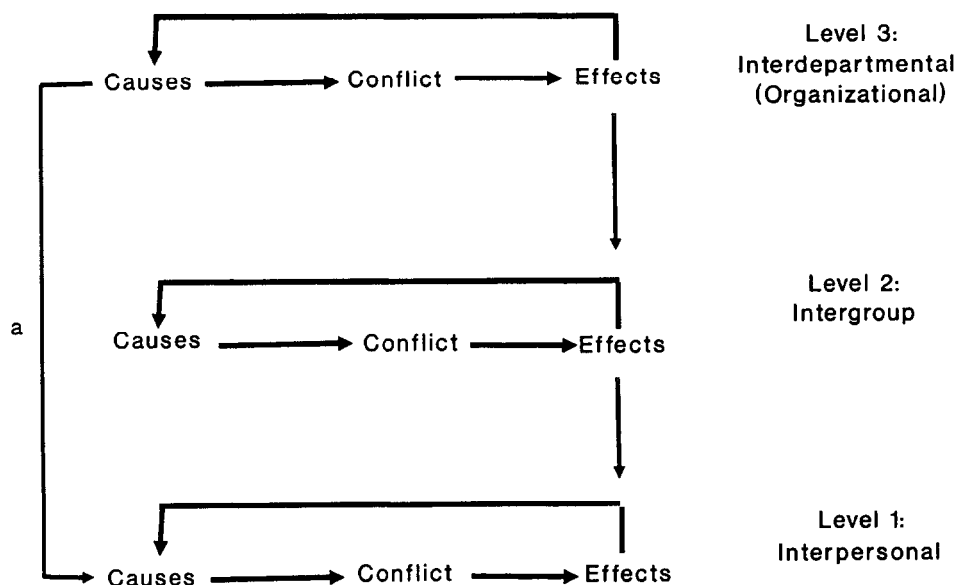
Some, but relatively few, authors use "context" simply to describe the setting of a conflict, without mentioning how elements in that setting impact on the conflict. For example, Morrill and Thomas (1992) refer to a context that is an organizational setting. And Druckman and Broome (1991), cautioning against generalizations from the specific context, use the term to indicate the simulation (of Greek and Turkish communities in Cyprus) in which his subjects participated.

Other authors use "context" as a reference to an independent variable that is under investigation (perspective 2). When doing so, some scholars are quite precise in describing their factors. For instance, Baron (1988a) refers to the context as high (versus low) pressure to come to an agreement. Zartman and Touval (1985) discuss power as a contextual variable. For Lawrence and Lorsch (1967) the contextual factors, factors which create conflict, are the complexity of the organization's task as well as the interdependence of the units. Prein (1984) refers to the type of issue, while Pinkley (1992) refers to the number and severity of the issues, as contextual factors. Morrill (1991) notes the contextual effects of interpersonal networks (fragmented versus densely connected). And Wong, Tjosvold and Lee (1992) as well as Kozan (1989) refer to the contextual effects of culture and conflict management styles.

While the above authors are precise in citing context as an independent variable(s), others are somewhat vague. Wilson (1969), for example, argues that context influences whether or not quality circles will help to reduce worker-management conflict, but is unclear as to what context entails.

The next two perspectives (#3, the field in which the conflict is embedded and #4, the structural level of the conflict) on conflict context can be jointly represented in Figure 2. This representation indicates that conflicts take place at different levels (for example, level 1 represents the interpersonal context; level 2 is the intergroup context, and level 3 is interdepartmental). Also, this representation indicates that causal factors reside at external levels as well as within the primary level (Rosseau, 1985). For example, causes at the interdepartmental level (e.g., a lack of adequate floorspace) can produce conflict at the interpersonal level.

With this conceptual representation (Figure 2) as our guide, consider the third context perspective: context is the field in which conflict is embedded.



**Figure 2.** Multiple Conflict Levels

Every conflict resides in an environment or context. For example, a leader-subordinate dispute takes place within a department, which in turn is nested in an organization, that is part of a larger industry.

Because it is embedded in, rather than isolated from, the environment, the conflict can be affected by elements in the environment (Sheppard, 1992). These elements can alter the causes, effects, escalation or the management of the conflict and at times, generate the conflict. Brown (1983) gives an example of this last process: two parties with unequal power might be co-existing quite harmoniously in separate departments. Their conflict is engendered, however, (Arrow a in Figure 2) when the organization forces them to interact in a dependent situation (e.g., to draw from the same limited resources).

Given that the contextual (environmental) elements can generate conflict or alter facets of the process, the relevant question becomes: what contextual factors impact upon the:

1. causes
2. core
3. effects
4. escalation and
5. management of the conflict?

For the most part, environmental factors are found to contribute causes and to impact on the conflict management. As for causes, we find several of

these have their roots in higher-level systems: among these are power imbalances (Blalock, 1989), interdependence (Thompson, 1967) status differences, (Walton & Dutton, 1969) and a distributive relationship (Walton, Dutton & Cafferty, 1969).

Turning to the environmental effects on conflict management, we find more extensive reports. As noted in the next section, superiors (at an organizational level) focus on interpersonal as well as intergroup conflicts and take steps to reduce them (Brown, 1983). Specifically, they set up grievance systems, alter structures to reduce interdependence, reinforce cooperative behavior, and express their displeasure with the disputants.

Also there are environmental effects from the conflict-management efforts of mediators, arbitrators, or constituents. In addition, organizations develop norms as to how people within them should handle conflict. Similarly, organizational incentive structures, rules, procedures, and power structures are organizational-level factors that often reduce conflicts at interpersonal and intergroup levels Thomas, 1988; Morrill, 1991).

Consider now the fourth context perspective which views context as the structural level (or paradigm) of the conflict. Researchers adopting this perspective usually ask whether conflict processes being examined at level 1, level 2, level 3 or level *n* will be found at a different level. That is, the concern is with generalizability of findings. A simple example illustrates this perspective. As Putnam and Folger (1988) report, reciprocated attack-attack conflict processes can be found at the inter-organizational level between labor and management as well as at the interpersonal level in husband-wife disputes (Gottman, 1979). Yet, such concordance is not to be found for most causes, effects, and escalations (Polley, 1988; Morrill, 1991; Putnam & Poole, 1987; Womack, 1988).

Given this deficiency, scholars and practitioners, must remember that a finding at one level may *not* be a good indication of what may be unfolding at another. Conflict knowledge—like most scientific knowledge—is based upon a sample that is observed and measured at a specific time, with less-than-perfect instruments, in a limited context. Therefore, conflict findings must be viewed as somewhat context-bound, and the steps based on this knowledge (e.g., restructuring a work schedule in order to decrease interdependence) should be conservative.

While this deficiency imposes these constraints, it concomitantly indicates a direction in which conflict research should proceed. By testing whether conceptualizations and findings at one level hold true at another, researchers can increase the knowledge base and provide guides for those who utilize this knowledge. Such cross-level research will probably also identify new conceptual issues, perhaps not recognized at the original level (Rousseau, 1985).

### **Conflict Management: The Disputants' Role**

Regardless of their context, most conflicts benefit from attempts to manage them. These can come from one of two sources, from the disputants themselves



**Table 4.** Disputants' Conflict-Management Tactics**Prescriptive**

- Be aware of the conflict causes and results
- Note the alternatives
- Take steps to deal with the causes, conflict and results
- Attempt to change the other, the conditions, and one's own behavior
- Improve mood
- Express disagreement in a reasonable fashion
- Link actions to positive intent
- Be open-minded
- Establish cooperative goals
- Openly discuss opposing views
- Address dispute concomitantly from own and opponent's position
- Hold to functional values
- GRIT

**Descriptive**

- (The above prescriptive approaches can also be included in this category)
- Violence and competitive use of force
- Agree to symbols of defeat
- Compromise
- Convert the opponent
- Totalist: attempts to completely beat the opponent
- Totalist approach with interim agreements
- Deterrence plus punishment
- Mixed, firm but cooperative approach
- Conciliation
- Latent acceptance, accommodation
- Forcing
- Avoiding
- Compromising
- Problem-solving (collaboration)

or from third parties. In this section we'll discuss the disputants' endeavors, and in the subsequent one we'll examine those of third parties.

The disputants, for a number of reasons, attempt to manage their conflict (Blalock, 1989): the net cost of the conflict becomes unacceptably high, resources are depleted, goals change, new alternatives surface, or the disputants are simply fatigued.

Then what happens? The literature holds two responses: one prescriptive, what the disputants should do; and one descriptive, what disputants actually do to manage the conflict (Table 4).

Deutsch (1990) probably is the primary player in the normative school. His advice is that disputants should be aware of the causes and consequences of conflict as well as the alternatives to it. Then the disputants should take steps (e.g., face the conflict, distinguish between interests and positions, listen attentively, speak to be understood) to deal with the causes, the conflict itself and its effects. Hocker and Wilmot (1991) follow a somewhat similar route, with more attention given to the causes of conflict and less emphasis on the interpersonal dynamics. Their advice, in short, is that each disputant should



attempt to change the opponent's behavior, the conflict conditions, (e.g., scarce resources or perceptions of incompatible goals) or his own behavior.

In a similar vein, Baron (1984) advises improving mood and expressing disagreement, in a reasonable fashion. Thomas and Pondy (1977) counsel disputants to indicate the "intent" (e.g., the intent to help or not to harm) of their behaviors. Kottler (1994) suggests disputants take responsibility and avoid blaming others. Tjosvold (1985) encourages disputants to be open-minded; also, he (Tjosvold, Dann & Wong, 1992) recommends the establishment of cooperative goals and open discussion of opposing views. From a related perspective, Eiseman (1978) as well as Gray (1985) advocate a type of integrative thinking in which a disputant thinks about the conflict concomitantly from his own and the opponent's position. Specifically, they want the disputants to focus on what they've achieved, or jointly can achieve, instead of pondering what they've given up. In doing so they should hold to values of openness, integrity, and justice.

From the international arena, the most frequently quoted advice comes from Osgood (1962) who advocates the GRIT approach (Graduated and Reciprocated Initiatives in Tension-reduction). In this approach, one disputant takes a set of trust-building steps, such as announcement of her steps ahead of time, establishment and observation of a timetable, invited reciprocity, no retaliation, and rewarded cooperation.

Guidance from the prescriptive school motivates us to broach the descriptive question: what steps do disputants actually take to manage their conflicts? Very often, they tolerate the conflict, letting it run its course. At other times, they muddle through, trying out a variety of approaches. As Pruitt and Rubin (1986) point out, the disputants can proceed in a trial and error fashion: one approach is tried; the disputants then turn to a second approach, to find it works only for a while; subsequently, they try something else. As they push forward, the disputants interpret the conflict in a variety of ways (Pinkley, 1990; Pinkley & Northcraft, 1994) and are guided by their goals as they try to resolve it. While one of these goals is conflict-reduction, it is often matched and merged with those of fairness, face-saving, equity, revenge, or high self-rewards.

Disputants are also guided by experience, both by what has worked and what has not, and by their culture. An example of this latter influence is that Japanese disputants (because their culture requires harmony) are expected to take nonconfrontational steps before directly addressing the conflict. Specifically, a Japanese farmer may anticipate and prevent conflict by not repairing his own tractor. Why? Because such an open step might generate a request to repair his neighbor's equipment (Lebra, 1976).

Goals, interpretations, experiences, culture, and a host of other factors influence the disputants and underpin their conflict-management approaches. At times a set of heuristic forms, which are inconsistently or contingently applied. For example, Murnighan and Conlon (1991) found their disputants (string quartets) tended to abandon the discussion (delay confrontation) when they were ensnared in controversy. They developed some heuristics, such as giving control to the person playing the lead. And they were very inconsistent

in their approaches; letting one person have his way today and another, his way tomorrow.

Such a rich and capricious variety of disputant conflict-management approaches provides an ample base for the descriptive literature. As a starting point, and to avoid redundancy, we note that many disputants do engage in the prescriptions and proscriptions offered by Deutsch (1990), Hocker and Wilmot (1991), Baron (1984), Thomas and Pondy (1977), Tjosvold (1985) and others (Table 4).

In addition to these approaches are those observed by Coser (1967). The disputants, he reports, can turn to violence, in order to destroy the opponents or to hurt them sufficiently so that they acquiesce. Or the disputants can overtly or tacitly agree on symbols (such a taking a vital fort or rail link) for one side's defeat.

Kriesberg (1992) agrees that disputants can manage conflict violently, imposing their will on the opponent. Yet he emphasizes they can also compromise, withdraw or convert the opponent. In this last option, which is similar to Pruitt and Syna's (1985) competitive approach, one disputant convinces the other to accept and seek what the disputant wants.

In a more exhaustive treatment of the disputants' options, Kaplowitz (1984) lists seven strategies that a disputant can employ, ranging from a totalist approach (with the goal of complete victory) to latent acceptance of the opponent's strategy (a stalemate in which the enemy cannot be beaten).

As the above paragraphs reveal, the literature over the last two decades contains numerous disjointed descriptions of the disputants' management options. But for the most part, the literature has focused on a disputant's use of the techniques, "forcing," "avoiding" "compromising" "problem-solving", or "accommodation." Typically, these are limned on a two-dimensional grid.

As van de Vliert and Prein (1989) point out, researchers initially relied upon a one-dimension measure of conflict management. Within this dimension, cooperation and competition designated the opposite poles (Deutsch, 1949). Subsequently, Blake and Mouton (1964, 1970) developed a two-dimensional grid, with one dimension being "concern for production" and the other "concern for people." With the passage of time, these dimensions were redefined as "assertiveness" versus "cooperativeness" (Thomas, 1976), and "concern for self" versus "concern for others" (Rahim, 1986a), respectively.

These two orthogonal dimensions framed five styles of personal conflict management: forcing (assertive, uncooperative), avoiding (unassertive, uncooperative), compromising (moderately assertive, moderately cooperative), problem solving (assertive, cooperative) and accommodating (unassertive, cooperative). At least nine instruments have been developed to measure these conflict-management modes. They include those of Blake and Mouton (1964), Lawrence and Lorsch (1967), Hall (1969), Kilman and Thomas (1977), Putnam and Wilson (1982), Rahim (1983), Renwick (1975a), Riggs (1983), Ross and DeWine (1982). Five of these have been scrutinized in an issue of the *Management Communication Quarterly*, (Putnam, 1988).

Presently two instruments seem to dominate in research usage; they are MODE (Management-of-Differences Exercise), the Kilman and Thomas (1977) instrument, and the Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory (ROCI-II) (Rahim 1983; Rahim & Magner, 1994, 1995).

The availability of instruments to measure a party's management of his own conflict, the ease of comprehending the two-dimensional model and the ease of administering the instruments to one party in the conflict have focused many researchers' attention on the variables measured by the instrument. That is, researchers have very often asked what factors dictate the use of forcing, avoiding, compromising, problem solving or accommodating.

Looking first at a party (other) characteristic, we find some evidence (Rahim, 1983; Kilman & Thomas, 1977; Jamieson & Thomas, 1974) that males are apt to use forcing as a conflict resolution approach, while females rely on the other tactics. However, the conclusion is not clear-cut, given that three studies (Bigoness, Grigsby & Rosen, 1980; Renwick, 1977; Shockley-Zalabak, 1988) found no sex effects.

Turning to relationship variables, we find superiors, in a superior-subordinate conflict, tend to prefer forcing (Howat & London, 1980; Morley & Shockley-Zalabak, 1986; Phillips & Cheston, 1978; Putnam & Wilson, 1982) and subordinates prefer avoiding (London & Howat, 1978), smoothing (Putnam & Wilson, 1982) or compromising (Renwick, 1975b).

As for the effects of the other's behavior, we find that a disputant tends to reciprocate the style employed by the other; specifically, when the other uses forcing, so does the party (Cosier & Ruble, 1981), and when he or she faces an accommodating other, the party typically is accommodating.

We find also that the conflict issue and the context of the conflict affects the choice of the management style. For example, Renwick (1975b) found that disputants were apt to choose confrontation on substantive issues such as salaries, promotions and performance appraisal. In conflict over issues of personal habits or mannerisms, they were apt to rely on compromise.

When examining the above reports, we acknowledge the contribution of the MODE, ROCI-II and other instruments that measure the disputants' management techniques. These two-dimension devices consolidate a plethora of techniques into approximately five categories or styles. However, the use of a two-dimensional instrument has generated two-dimensional thinking, and the discussion or investigation of five styles has conduced many researchers into thinking these five are all-inclusive. In the future, scholars need to move beyond the two-dimensional conceptualization and simultaneously focus on additional styles. More about this in the last section.

### **Conflict Management: The Role of Third Parties**

While the disputants themselves can manage their conflict, so can third parties. Typically these parties intervene because resolution of the conflict is to their benefit, they are called upon, or they are expected to assist in the conflict

**Table 5.** Managers' Conflict-Management Tactics

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Adopt appropriate leadership styles
Structure organization to avoid conflict
Address causes, diagnose and correct
Group discussions
T-groups
Workshops
Encourage a negotiation
Arbitrate or mediate
Enforce a truce
Eliminate one adversary
Expand group boundaries
Reduce interaction between disputants
Reduce communication between disputants
Transfer a disputant
Create buffer positions
Set up formalized appeal systems
Establish rules that disputes are to be directed to HRM group
Force contact between disputants
Redirect disputants' behaviors
Reallocate resources
Reframe disputants' perspectives
Realign the underlying forces
Guide communications between disputants
Have third parties reframe the dispute and its episodes
Attain knowledge of the conflict issues
Establish a working relationship with the disputants
Instill a cooperative, problem-solving attitude between the disputants
Facilitate creative group processes
Act as decision makers
Overlook problems
Offer incentives

---

resolution. In all of these situations, third parties are apt to become involved only when the disputants are unable or unwilling to handle the conflict.

When third parties intervene, they employ a rich repertoire of approaches. Often they proceed in a trial-and-error fashion, trying one technique, then developing and relying on another. As they do so, a mixture of goals—harmony versus fairness, organizational effectiveness, or long-term stability—contribute to the variety of the techniques as do differences in the third-parties' experiences, demands of others, cultural differences, the nature(s) of the conflict and the disputants' needs.

When reporting the various third-party approaches, the literature tends to concentrate on mediation and arbitration. Somewhat neglected has been the manager's efforts (Table 5). (For an exception see Dworkin, 1994.)

### *Managers' Conflict Management*

Usually managers have conflict management as a major priority; consequently, they may adopt leadership styles (e.g., the GII style of the Vroom-

Yetton-Jago model) that serve this goal. And they structure organizations so as to avoid or minimize conflict. Once conflict does develop, the managers attempt to manage it. To do so, they often address the causes. For doing so, Rahim and Bonoma (1979) indicate managers should diagnose the conflict—be it of an intraperson, intragroup or intergroup nature—then find its source, and address it via behavioral or structural interventions. Consider for example an intergroup conflict (purchasing versus production) that is spawned by ambiguity as to which group has jurisdiction over the quality of purchased materials. Here the manager could spot the conflict, identify its source (the ambiguity) and manage the conflict by ruling who is in control or by bringing the groups together to hammer out who is in charge.

Quite often the managerial approach involves this participative tack. Those who have suggested that managers rely on group discussions (Vroom & Jago, 1988; Vroom & Yetton, 1973), seem to favor group participation even though Crouch and Yetton (1987) find that managers who doubt their ability to solve conflicts don't follow this advice. Blake, Shepherd and Mouton (1964) support this orientation in proposing their inventory of problem-solving methods. More formalized versions of the participative approach are to be found in Doob's (1970) suggested T-groups and in workshops, directed by reputable third parties.

The participation approach has drawn some support from academicians (eg., Karambayya & Brett, 1989; Karambayya, Brett & Lytle, 1992) as well as from managers. One of the latter (Tjosvold, 1989) notes that leader-directed participation helps to resolve conflict because it concomitantly solves a problem and strengthens interpersonal relationships. In her approach the conflict is not simply handed over to the group. Rather the leader identifies the conflict, determines her role in it, seeks to improve communication, curtails the use of negative strategies, encourages joint responsibility for the conflict management, and maintains a momentum for changes and an eventual solution.

Researchers have found that managers use autocratic as well as participative approaches to conflict. For example, managers encourage negotiation, arbitrate, mediate, enforce a truce, offer incentives, and even overlook conflicts (Karambayya & Brett, 1989; Phillips, 1988; Putnam 1994; Shapiro & Rosen, 1994). With a more structural approach, Aldrich (1971) and Kahn (1965) note that leaders can respond to intergroup conflict by expanding the boundaries of one group so that the opposing group members are incorporated within the group. Burton (1969) points out an opposite tack, reducing the interaction and communication between disputants.

Robbins (1974) mixes the authoritarian and participative options, leaning somewhat in the authoritarian direction. The manager, he believes, can attack the conflict structurally by transferring a disputant, creating buffer positions, setting up formalized appeal systems, establishing rules that disputes are to be taken to the HRM group, or on occasion, forcing contact between the disputing parties.

From a similar, but more diagnostic approach, Brown (1983) advocates interventions for redirecting disputants' behaviors, reallocating resources, reframing perspectives and realigning the underlying forces. Some specifics here:

interventions aimed at disputant behavior include fractionating issues, creating new alternatives and altering communications. When reallocating resources the manager can expand resources or call upon third parties who might be of assistance. And to reframe perspectives the manager can clarify superordinate goals, revise unrealistic stereotypes or clarify which forces are promoting the conflict. To realign forces, a manager might revise formal rules, negotiate standards for appropriate behavior, or reduce the amount of specialization (Katz, 1964).

Looking back on these suggestions we're left with a question akin to that generated by the prescriptions for the disputants' conflict management: do these techniques work? The answer is a qualified, yes. Rubin (1994) notes any third party, such as a manager, can handle conflict; however, outside intervention does have some difficulties. First, it can disrupt a conflict resolution that is moving ahead on its own. Second, the third party (manager) is apt to press her own interests in the conflict resolution. There's a strong tendency for the manager to rely upon power to reduce the conflict. And finally, just as the disputants, the manager can blunder as he attempts to manage the conflict. For example, he could bring the parties together when they should be separate, cooling off.

Deutsch's (1990) suggestions avoid some of these pitfalls and provide a nice bridge between managerial conflict management and mediation. Without designating who the third party is, Deutsch suggests he or she attain substantive knowledge of the conflict issues, establish a working relationship with the disputants; instill a cooperative, problem-solving attitude between the disputants, and facilitate creative group processes. These suggestions, as those of Robbins (1974), Phillips (1988), Hocker and Wilmot (1991), Moore (1986) and others indicate that the manager has the option of using her power to manage conflict, or she can be more restrained and mediate.

### *Mediation*

Mediators use about 100 conflict-management techniques (Wall & Lynn, 1993). Some of these are applied to the party-other relationship; others are targeted at the parties themselves; and still others are focused on the parties' relationship with outsiders.

For decades, researchers have recognized these techniques and more recently they've noted that mediators employ sets of techniques (strategies) to solve the party-other disputes. For example, mediators use certain coercive tactics (substantive pressing) to move a disputant off a position, and they also employ more gentle ones (substantive suggesting) to nudge the disputant into a new position (McLaughlin, Carnevale & Lim, 1991).

Do these tactics and strategies work? According to Kressel and Pruitt (1989) the answer must be somewhat equivocal. They judge the median settlement rate to be about 60% with a range between 20% and 80% (Bercovitch, 1989; Kressel, 1985; Kressel & Pruitt, 1985; Wagner, 1990). While this average is lower than one would like, we should bear in mind Schwebel, Schwebel, and Schwebel's (1985) observation that mediation frequently attacks conflict causes; consequently, it is as much a preventative measure as it is one of resolution.



Even when it does not lead to a conflict settlement, mediation frequently improves the interaction between the disputants. Specifically, it improves their communication (Kelly & Gigy, 1989; Shaw, 1985, 1986), reduces stress (Zarski, Knight & Zarski, 1985) and on occasion, provides the disputants with problem-solving skills that they can rely upon in the future.

Looking at another indicator of success, we find the parties' satisfaction with the mediation process to be quite high. Kressel and Pruitt (1989) report it is typically about 75%, even for disputants who fail to reach agreement (Kelly & Gigy, 1989; Pearson & Thoennes, 1989; Roehl & Cook, 1989; Thoennes & Pearson, 1985). Disputants tend to be satisfied with mediation because they retain control of the situation; mediation is inexpensive; usually it takes into consideration all aspects of the dispute; it allows for catharsis, with confidentiality; and in general, it is viewed as fair.

Because of the mediators' efforts and disputants' satisfaction with the process, compliance with mediated agreements is typically very high, about 77% (Roehl & Cook, 1989; McEwen & Maiman, 1984, 1989).

### *Arbitration*

The discussion of mediation underpins a concise report on arbitration. In general, an arbitrator can employ any of the techniques or strategies used by a mediator. Additionally, he or she has the option of dictating the solution (outcomes) to the conflict.

There are roughly four types of arbitration: conventional, final offer (e.g., DeNisi & Dworkin, 1981), med-arb, and nonbinding. With conventional arbitration, the arbitrator can employ any techniques he chooses and make any ruling. For final offer arbitration, however, the arbitrator must choose one negotiator's last offer. The arbitrator, in med-arb, first mediates and then arbitrates. And for nonbinding arbitration, the arbitrator suggests an agreement point, but the parties do not have to accept it.

Does arbitration work? By definition, except in the nonbinding case, it gives a solution or agreement. Yet conventional arbitration seems to have a "chilling effect." Some parties conclude they can receive higher outcomes from the arbitration than from a negotiated agreement with other. Therefore, they hold to their position or even raise their demands so as to tilt the arbitration in their direction (Feuille, 1975; Wheeler, 1978).

Final offer arbitration tends to remedy this effect. Because the arbitrator here will select one final offer, both parties are motivated to negotiate reasonably (or to at least make a reasonable final offer) in hopes the arbitrator will choose their final offer.

There is strong evidence that final offer arbitration does overcome the "chill." Specifically, it produces more negotiated agreements than does conventional arbitration (Feuille, 1975). It lowers the parties' aspirations and brings them closer to agreement in the negotiation (Notz & Starke, 1978). Likewise, it resolves more issues and tends to bring greater final concessions (Grigsby & Bigoness, 1982).

As for the effectiveness of med-arb, the data currently provide tentative conclusions: it seems that med-arb is more effective than mediation in generating agreements and is somewhat more effective than conventional arbitration in producing cooperative bargaining (e.g., Pruitt, McGillicuddy, Welton & Fry, 1989). Turning to nonbinding arbitration, we find it difficult to distinguish from mediation; therefore, its effects are assumed to parallel those of mediation.

### *Conciliation and Consultation*

Rather than mediating or arbitrating, the third party can provide conciliation (James, 1987; Robinson & Parkinson, 1985; Webb, 1986) or consultation (Fisher, 1990). As for the distinction between the latter two processes, there appear to be more similarities than differences. Both are less formal than mediation (or arbitration) and are more voluntary; likewise, both give less control to the third party and more to the disputants. Also in both, the third party provides an informal communication link between the disputants and has a primary goal of improved relations, rather than settlement of the issues.

As for the differences between conciliation and consultation, we can find a subtle one. Fisher (1990) holds that the third party, when consulting, does not, and should not, proffer specific solutions or proposals, because the resolution must come from the disputants or their constituencies. James' (1987) observation is that conciliators are even more arms-length: they not only let the disputants define and settle the issues; they also refrain from seeking information or making judgments prior to the conciliation.

Presently, there is evidence that consultation (Fisher, 1990) and conciliation (Blain, Goodman, Lowenberg, 1987; Tripp, 1985) do help to manage conflict. Yet because of their nonassertive nature, both seem less effective than mediation.

### *Recapitulation*

Let's summarize what has been covered to this point: Conflict is a process in which one party perceives that its interests are being opposed or negatively affected by another party (or parties). In this process there are causes, a core interaction, and effects. Some effects can feed back over time to become causes, to generate them, or to enhance previous causes. Such a, causes → core conflict → effects → causes, cycle can escalate or de-escalate over time. The conflict process unfolds in a context, and whenever conflict, escalated or not, occurs the disputants or third parties can attempt to manage it in some manner.

### **Research and Managerial Suggestions**

The preceding sections spawn the question, where do we go from here, as researchers and as managers? Consider first some research avenues, several of which have already been indicated.

#### *Suggestions for Future Research*

In the "Conflict Causes" section we proposed that multiple or complex issues have a seemingly inconsistent effect. Both tend to generate conflict. Yet,



they also make it easier to solve. The logic for the hypotheses is rather clear-cut; yet, it, along with the hypotheses need to be tested. These hypotheses are analogous to Pruitt and Olczak's (in press) observation that groups (versus individuals) have a strong tendency to become entangled in conflicts; yet, they also seem more capable of extricating themselves.

In the "Conflict Effects" section we raised three of the most important questions in this article: is moderate conflict desirable? Is too little conflict as dysfunctional as too much? And should leaders, at times, promote conflict to attain organizational goals? Our tentative answers to these questions are no, no, and no. We feel that scholars who answer these questions affirmatively, are at times confusing debate, disagreement and divergent goals with conflict. Also, we believe that many of the effects ascribed to "moderate conflict", that is, personal development, problem awareness, group efficiency, accurate perceptions, could be attained via other processes. Finally, keep in mind that the potential costs of moderate conflict and its escalation could, in most cases, override the benefits.

In the "Escalation" section, it was noted that some authors feel conflict has a strong predisposition to escalate. Does it? In some conflicts, the relationship between the disputants does tend to elicit reciprocally antagonistic behaviors. These, in turn, worsen as the parties choose to fight rather than to withdraw or seek peaceful accords.

But we feel most conflicts wind down, de-escalate and that escalation is very context dependent. Perhaps scholars from the predestination school have over emphasized the conflicts that escalated, and thereby became more visible.

A closely related topic in the study of conflict escalation, and one that needs more attention is its management. Does one manage escalation in the same manner that one manages nascent conflicts? Probably not; it seems entirely different tactics and strategies would be employed. The recent conceptual piece by Pruitt and Olczak (in press) represents a step in the correct direction. For moderate conflicts, they feel, a few conditions need be addressed and a few procedures implemented. On the other hand, a more intensive and broad-based assault is called for when there is severe escalation.

In the "Context" section, we (as Deutsch, 1993) suggested that researchers should determine if conflict processes (causes, core conflict, effects, escalation, or management) detected at one level (i.e., interpersonal, intergroup, interdepartment) could be found at different ones. That is, we suggested studies that would establish the generalizability of findings.

Two steps need to precede this cross-level validation. First, some judgments should be made as to which findings are most important. Secondly, the findings deemed important should be replicated at least once within the original level. Both of these prescriptions would enhance researcher effectiveness: the first ensuring that trivial relationships aren't pursued or built upon. And the second protects against time wasted on spurious findings.

From the "Conflict Management" section comes a clear-cut research question: do the various conflict-management suggestions, proffered to the disputants, actually work? Admittedly, they have a logical appeal, but do they work? Also,

is it necessary for *both* disputants to follow the suggested courses of action or can one disputant, following the prescriptions, manage the conflict? Perhaps one disputant's attempts to resolve the conflict—through noting alternatives, improving mood, being open-minded or discussing the opponent's view—could backfire, motivating the opponent to hold strong or escalate the conflict.

In similar vein, we question whether or not the advice given to third parties is correct. We have some information that the mediation techniques are effective; yet, there is a major need to test the advice given to managers as well as the approaches managers are reported to employ. Some specifics: does the GII (group participation) style generate less conflict than the other styles? Does addressing the cause of a conflict, once begun, prove successful in its management? When is the autocratic approach more effective? And are the conciliation and consultation approaches effective, especially for intra-organizational conflicts?

In that section we also held that use of the two-dimensional ROCI-II, MODE, and similar instruments has generated two-dimensional thinking. Specifically, scholars define productive, integrative conflict management as that in which the two disputants have a high joint payoff. Let us illustrate this point and our subsequent one using the classic integrative example, the division of an orange. Two ladies are arguing about the division of a single orange. One asks for a split that favors her; the other also calls for a split, but one in her favor. After some discussion, they initially agree on a 50-50 split. Yet, when they realize, or possibly a third party points out, that one wanted the peel for marmalade and the other lady wants the pulp for the juice, they agree that the first lady will receive all the peel (vs. one-half of it) and the other will receive all the juice.

This is a classic two-dimensional framing of conflict management. Why? Because we ignore the seeds. What happened to the orange seeds? Did the ladies toss them out the window so that their integrative agreement generated costs for the third parties on the balcony below. Or did they locate a Johnny-Orange-Seed who could use the seeds and also benefit from their integrative agreement? These seeds (though seemingly trivial) exemplify our point: it's that integrative conflict management, and research on the topic, should take into account the payoffs to other parties. The integrative equation should not simply be

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Max } Y &= a + b_1x_1 + b_2x_2 \\ \text{where } Y &= \text{total utility or payoff} \\ x_1 &= \text{utility or payoff to disputant 1} \\ x_2 &= \text{utility or payoff to disputant 2} \end{aligned}$$

Rather it should be something akin to

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Max } Y &= a + b_1x_1 + b_2x_2 + b_3x_3 \dots b_nx_n + b_{n+1}x_1x_2 + b_{n+2}x_1x_3 \dots \\ \text{where } Y &= \text{total utility or payoff} \\ x_1 &= \text{utility or payoff to disputant 1} \\ x_2 &= \text{utility or payoff to disputant 2} \\ x_3 \text{ to } x_n &= \text{utility or payoff to third parties affected by the dispute} \end{aligned}$$

Our second point—which is limned by the term  $b_{n+1}x_1x_2$ —is that the conflict management and research into it should devote more emphasis to relationships. Conflict management should not, as it does now, attempt only to maximize the parties' outcomes; it should also address the relationship. Consider once again the orange example. Increasing the payoffs to each lady, more juice to one and more peel to the other, is admittedly of value. Yet enhancement of their relationship (e.g., raised  $x_1x_2$ ) would probably have a significantly greater impact on their joint utility ( $Y$ ).

Illustrated in this manner, the prescription is somewhat obvious. However, researchers have consistently focused on outcome maximization. The reasons appear twofold: first, our conflict and conflict-management theories have been strongly influenced by economic theory, which stresses personal utilities. Second, this approach is very much a western perspective one in which personal outcomes are emphasized above interpersonal relations (Boardman & Horowitz, 1994). Given these groundings, it is understandable that researchers have emphasized outcome maximization, but now is a time to shift gears, to attend also to the relationships.

In a closely related vein, we suggest that researchers look more broadly at the dependent variables in conflict management. A starting point is to ask, what is effective management? Operationally most researchers consider "settlement" an effective outcome. Yet this is a short-term measure, and it tends to focus upon the disputants' outcomes, and perhaps encourages third parties to force agreements on the disputants. We feel a longer view is merited, as well as one that measures outcomes to the major parties affected by the dispute, and improvements in relationships.

We also call for more study of stabilized (non-escalated) long-term conflict. We find scant research or writings devoted to it. This is unfortunate because stabilized conflicts often run a long course and eventually have more devastating effects than their escalating counterparts. Escalating conflicts are attention-grabbers. With their increasing hostility, emotion, punch and counter-punch, the escalated conflicts advertise themselves to the disputants and to third parties. Consequently, the involved or affected parties seek to resolve, contain, constrain, or flee from them. Seldom do they ignore them. Stabilized conflicts, on the other hand, are often allowed to drag on. Moment by moment, day by day, year by year, their marginal costs seem minor and are allowed to accumulate. The eventual physical costs, as we witness in the Somolian civil war, IRA-Britain confrontation, Cambodian morass or PLO-Israeli standoffs, become overwhelming.

A final suggestion for researchers is that cultural influences be investigated more extensively. Current research about conflict and its management, for the most part, has been contributed by Westerners, drawing from observations of Westerners. Consequently, most of the dominant theories today rest upon our perspectives, neglecting non-Western viewpoints (Horowitz & Boardman, 1994).

To broaden this perspective, researchers need to examine the causes, core process, effects, escalation and management of conflict in different cultures.

Such research will not only afford us a better understanding of conflict in these cultures, it will also indicate if current theories and findings are culture bound. A number of authors have taken up this task, with empirical work (Chiu & Kosinski, 1994; Jones, 1995; Leung, Au, Fernandez-Dols, Iwawaki, 1992; Rosenthal, Demetrious & Efkides, 1989; Ting-Toomey et al., 1991; Trubinsky, Ting-Toomey & Lin, 1991) and conceptual pieces (Augsburger, 1992; Berry, 1994; Biesheuvel, 1987; Boss & Mariano, 1987; Ibrahim & Schroeder, 1990; Kimmel, 1994). Researchers have also recently been provided with excellent guidance in this undertaking (Lytle, Brett, Barsness, Tinsley, in press).

We laud these scholars' efforts and appreciate the guidance provided by Lytle et al.'s (in press) framework. Yet we add a caution, drawn mainly from the writings of Lederach (1994). When researchers undertake cross-cultural studies, they typically operate under the assumption that the definition or model developed in one culture is sufficiently robust to be applied, with some adjustments, to another culture. That is, they treat culture as a set of contextual variables (i.e., the field or environment in which the conflict is embedded). This operating assumption must be avoided because the basic conceptualization and interpretation of conflict differ from culture to culture. Conflict is not a cross-cultural generic process. A proton might be recognized as a proton in the U.S., India, Korea, China, Japan and Polynesia; however, conflict differs. For example in the West, conflict is seen as one person opposing or negatively affecting another party's interests or goals. Polynesians, on the other hand, view it as a mutual entanglement that is detrimental to both parties. And Koreans, think of conflict as a mutual disruption of society's harmony.

Given these differences, it seems ill-advised for researchers to develop a concept and interpretation of conflict in one society and shift these to another. Unfortunately—from an efficiency perspective—these differences many times force researchers in their cross-cultural work to redefine conflict and develop new models as they cross or span cultural boundaries.

### *Suggestions for Managers*

For practitioners our message is rather limpid: conflict will be prevalent in the future, not all of it will be easily recognized (Bartunek, Kolb & Lewicki, 1992) and its management will require nimble efforts.

Several factors will contribute to the prevalence. Future workforces will be increasingly diverse, and such diversity will set the stage for conflict (Donnellon & Kolb, 1994) as it spawns differing goals, perceptions, values, commitments and demands on resources.

Globalization and reductions of trade barriers will simultaneously reduce many companies' resources. At the same time, many organizational processes (e.g., TQM) are going to increase the interdependence among persons and units. This mix of reduced resources and heightened interdependence will underpin many conflicts.

This conflict, which springs from interdependence, tight resources, diversity and other sources, will not be self-managed by employees. In earlier times,

employees were willing to avoid, tolerate, suppress or self-manage conflict for the overall success of the organization. They did so because they wanted the organization to be successful; it, in turn, was expected to provide for them.

This reciprocal relationship has been significantly weakened as companies have downsized. Observing this process, employees have become insecure about their jobs and have lost trust in the organization and their managers; consequently, they're less likely to pull together and manage their own conflicts for the sake of the company. Even in organizations that have not downsized, employees feel a modest commitment to company success, because they do not plan to remain with it for an extended time.

Given the increased conflict pressures in the future and the low incentive for employees to manage their conflicts, what steps should managers take?

**Suggestion 1:** Our initial response draws from one made to researchers; do not allow conflict to build, assuming that conflict is an asset. Also, don't promote conflict, assuming that a little "healthy competition" is beneficial. As noted earlier, no set of empirical findings supports this assumption.

**Suggestion 2:** Keep in mind that a conflict avoided from the beginning is better than a conflict managed. Therefore, the manager should attend to the causes laid out in this article and when possible address them prior to conflict occurring. For example, an effort should be made to avoid/eliminate interdependencies between people who have divergent goals.

**Suggestion 3:** Since conflicts cannot always be averted, some need to be addressed. In doing so, keep in mind that a conflict by the time it is identified has probably proceeded far enough that rectifying the original cause may not be sufficient. It might also be necessary to address some effects, such as distrust, linking of issues, negative attributions, and/or the results of an escalation. It is also possible that elimination of the cause is not feasible, or the cost/benefit ratio of doing so might be low.

**Suggestion 4:** If you can identify the issues, carve them down to a salient, manageable set, (but don't try to boil the dispute down to one or few critical issues). Then attempt to set up trades in which each side gives in on issues that have low costs for it and relatively high payoffs for the opponent.

**Suggestion 5:** Subsequently, adopt a pragmatic approach. First, try some techniques that seem reasonable. (We suggest some inexpensive ones. Also, look for structural modifications rather than putting the blame on people and their relationships.) If each of these does not work, try a different one or set. Again if there's failure, a new set should be put in place and the failure noted. This approach should be continued until the conflict is reduced or eliminated. Most importantly, remember what failed and what was successful for each episode.

We proffer this trial-with-memory approach because currently there is a great deal of uncertainty as to which conflict management techniques are successful. Actually, we know more about the steps third parties take or prefer than we do about what works. Also, most conflict management approaches are contingently effective; that is, they work in some situations, but not in others.

Consequently, a pragmatic experimental approach is more apt to be successful than a fixed set of guidelines.

**Suggestion 6:** When managing a conflict there's a tendency to fixate on it and its resolution. Bear in mind, however, that disputants value procedural justice perhaps as much as the dispute resolution (Tyler, 1991). Admittedly, conflict is costly to the disputants (as well as to their organization), and the management of the conflict is beneficial to all. However, the disputants want to be treated fairly as the conflict is managed, and they want to have a voice in its management. If these are denied, the disputant-disputant conflict might be replaced with a disputant-manager conflict.

To attain these goals, the manager might discuss the dispute more thoroughly than seems necessary, ask outsiders to verify the conflict-management approaches, or consult with the disputants' constituents.

**Suggestion 7:** Keep in mind that conflict management is a skill that can be taught and developed. Therefore, it can be delegated to subordinates or specialists in the Human Resources section. We mention this in closing because conflict management can be very time- and resource-consuming. Therefore, if managers attempt to resolve conflicts themselves, without adequate delegation, the results might well be limited.

### Closing Comments

In this article, we've attempted to present a broad analysis of conflict and its management. Initially we examined the causes, core process, and effects of conflict. Subsequently, it was noted that conflict operates as a cycle: causes initiate the core conflict and its effects; these effects can feed back to re-ignite the process, which in turn may or may not escalate. This conflict and cycling unfold in a variety of contexts. If the conflict persists, escalates, or winds down too slowly, the disputants or third parties are apt to try their hand at managing it.

Looking back over this literature, we're left with a nagging question: why is conflict so difficult to manage? Our answers draw on the earlier analogy with the common cold.

One retort is that conflict, like the cold, has multiple, oft sure-fire, causes. The cold is caused by a variety of viruses; likewise, conflict has a plethora of causes (Table 1).

Both the cold and conflict get fairly well under way before they are detected; consequently, they have the advantage of momentum. Also both have cycles that are self-sustaining. A cold virus invades (our) body cells, using cell proteins to replicate itself. Conflict too is self-generating; when it arises in a relationship, it bends social processes to its service. For example, if conflict yields benefits for a person, these motivate him to perpetuate the process. Or if it begets losses, these perpetuate the conflict because the losing party fights to catch up, to even the score.

We could continue with the analogies; yet, the most striking and meaningful one is that the cold and conflict are both moving targets and at times very clever moving targets. The cold virus attaches to body cells, injects



its RNA or DNA into the cells, organizes the cells' proteins into many replications of itself, explodes the cell and moves on to other cells. When the body's cells recognize the virus and muster their antibodies to manage it, the virus takes a smart tack. To thwart this maneuver the virus changes form (modifies its protein shell) so that the body doesn't recognize it.

As we've seen, the conflict process is also dynamic, self-perpetuating and constantly changing: effects become causes; original causes may disappear; new ones arise; the number of parties, as the issues, in the conflict can vary. Such dynamics make conflict a difficult target.

Overcoming these difficulties is probably the major challenge for our field. Until we are able to do so we'll face the same quandary as the virologists: being capable of describing the problem but unable to cure it.

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