

Conflict Continuum and Conflict Resolution Principles

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Conflict Continuum

Productive conflict

Disagreements occur. People talk through them respectfully. Interactions may be emotional, but these are manageable and productive. New ideas may emerge.

Mild conflict

Disagreements are somewhat emotional and personal, but people work through them with some effort. People may describe this as a conflict, but not seek help to manage it.

Strong conflict

Disagreements result in heightened emotions that may feel unmanageable. Parties may feel personally attacked. Parties would clearly describe this as a conflict. Other people notice the conflict.

Dysfunctional conflict

Parties avoid or attack each other. The conflict clearly affects personal and/or workplace productivity and health.



Differences in preferences

More identity/value-based

Fewer people involved

More people involved

Specific behaviors

Historical and cultural patterns

Single issue

Multiple intersecting issues

Simpler resolutions

More complex resolutions

Less time to resolve

More time to resolve

Conflict Resolution Principles

Conflict:

- Is the perceived incompatibility of interests, needs, or goals or anyplace two or more people are stuck;
- Some amount of conflict is a normal and unavoidable aspect of human interaction. Being stuck in conflict with no way out is not healthy and warrants deeper problem-solving;
- You can think of conflict along a continuum from small, nonconfrontational behaviors to unproductive, dysfunctional conflict. While conflict might not always progress in a linear way, this continuum model can help you assess the issues you are dealing with and your approach to solutions.

Productive, functional conflict:

- can be an opportunity for growth and change;
- can be used to strengthen relationships;
- can improve team creativity and innovation.

Unproductive, dysfunctional conflict:

- takes time away from productive pursuits;
- can affect physical and emotional health;
- can get worse over time, if not resolved.

Resolving conflict:¹

- should be done as early as possible in a conflict;
- is easier to do with a problem-solving mindset;
- requires skill, patience, persistence, and a sense of hope about resolution.

¹ Conflict resolution will be more effective and long-lasting in work environments with clear roles and responsibilities, fair processes, leadership that focuses on inclusion and team-building, and other supportive structures.