Putting Conflict to Work

By Dean Tjosvold

To make their organizations more competitive in the national and international marketplaces, to serve their customers more effectively, to improve productivity, and to maximize returns to investors, corporations are experimenting with new ways to organize. Managers are building strong corporate cultures that bind employees together into a productive, committed workforce. Project teams create new products, build bridges, and explore the marketplace. Labor-management groups discuss problems to improve productivity and quality of work life. Those contemporary innovations run contrary to traditional organizational philosophies that avoid conflict; in fact, those innovations assume implicitly that conflict can be constructive.

Traditional principles of management rely on the assumption that conflict, in that it disrupts and disorganizes, always should be minimized. Current organizational innovations in teamwork and labor-management relations, however (such as assigning responsibilities to a group and participative leadership), require productive conflict. In fact, research indicates that conflict can be highly constructive, though it must be managed skillfully. Human resource development specialists can assist innovative managers by developing the conflict-management skills and procedures needed to make those innovations work.

Conflict and management practices

Three basic differences between traditional and contemporary organizations require new attitudes toward conflict.

Design. The assignment of task responsibilities marks one difference in the ways traditional and contemporary organizations approach conflict. Traditional organizations define roles and tasks so that each can be fulfilled by one person. The individual is the basic building block of the organization and is expected to work independently and efficiently. Clear rules and procedures are meant to minimize conflict between individuals and guide the coordination of their tasks.

Contemporary organizations, on the other hand, assign many important tasks and responsibilities to groups. For example, designers, engineers, construction specialists, environmentalists, accountants, and administrators become a project team assigned to design and build a new transmission line.

> In the traditional organization, employees respect their managers by accepting their solutions

To make decisions effectively, work groups must resolve their conflicts. Project teams and task forces typically are composed of persons who will disagree—their members have different backgrounds, perspectives, and areas of expertise that make opposing views inevitable. Indeed, evidence indicates that the open, constructive discussion of opposing opinions contributes significantly to a team's success.

Values. Another difference concerns the value organizations put on relationships. To be rational, to maintain focus on the job, and not to let feelings interfere are core values of traditional organizations. Those values are impersonal and define the term "businesslike." Anger and irritation as well as softer emotions, such as affection, disrupt work and objectivity.

As Ouchi in *Theory Z* (Addison-Wesley, 1981) and Peters and Waterman in *In Search of Excellence* (Harper & Row, 1982) point out, many successful contemporary companies have developed a nurturing culture. They try to communicate that they care about their employees as people and that they want the employees to care about each other. Employees, they feel, are not machines, but want to be appreciated, valued, and respected.

Caring, genuine relationships require open, constructive discussions of conflicts. As people work together and express feelings, they confront problems, frustrations, and anger that, if suppressed and avoided, will undermine relationships within the organization. The philosophy of trust and caring will appear shallow and hypocritical without conflict management.

Managerial roles. In traditional organizations, managers are expected to be in control: a good manager is a strong, decisive leader who clearly announces goals and plans and gets subordinates to accomplish them. When a problem occurs, the leader quickly assesses the situation, develops a solution from his or her wide perspective, and uses power, authority, and persuasion to get it accepted. During crises, effective managers rally subordinates behind their decisions. In the traditional organization, employees respect their managers by accepting their solutions. To disagree is to question the manager's personal and role competence.

That traditional view of the manager's role rests on the assumption that conflict and discussion of opposing views are harmful. Disagreement is disloyal dissension that disrupts. The manager should have the answers, be able to quell all dissent, and instill unity. When a conflict occurs between subordinates, a manager should step in quickly to end it so that they can continue to work.

Many contemporary managers believe participation is the best way to improve productivity and the quality of work life. They want employees involved in solving problems and making decisions. They believe that employees can contribute information

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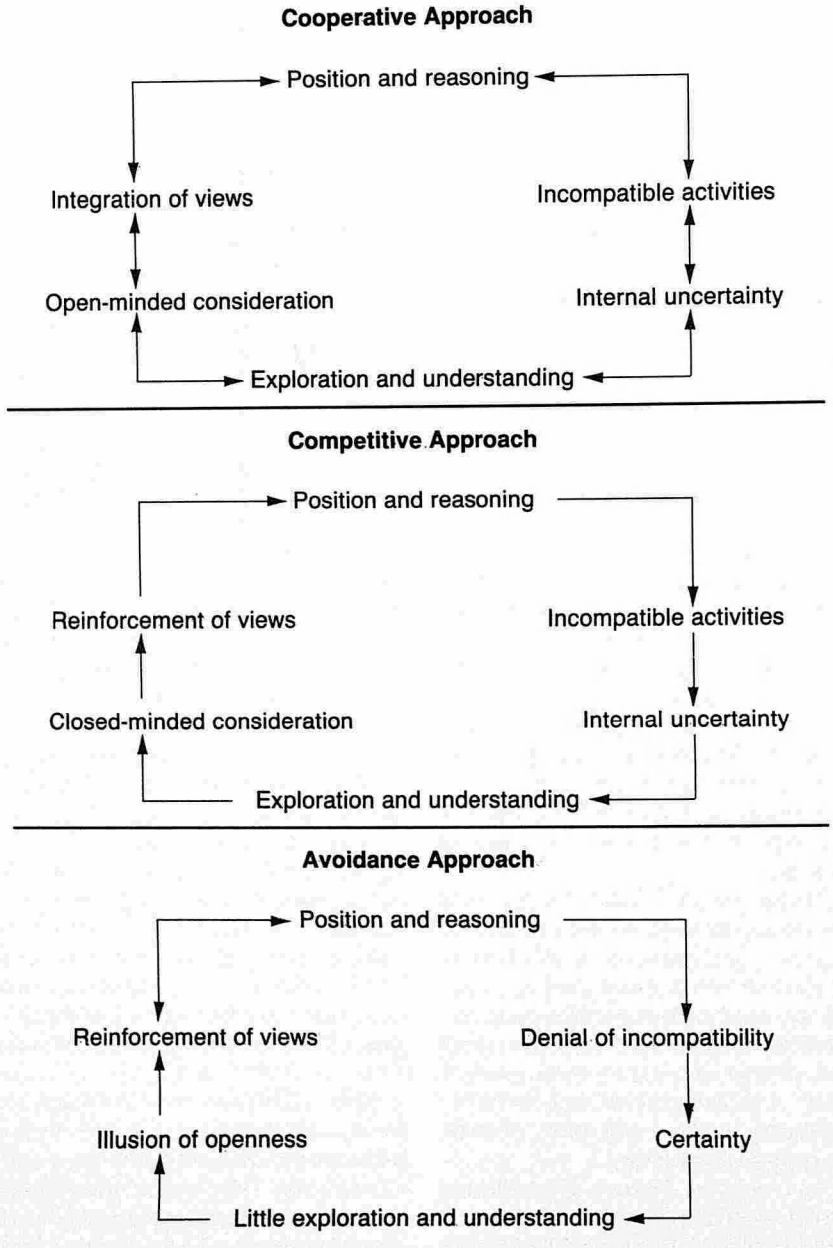
and new ideas to improve the quality of decisions; and in turn become more committed to their implementation. Employees benefit because they feel valued and appreciated as they contribute to their company.

This participatory approach to management leadership is based implicitly on the assumption that conflict can be useful, and that conflicts may be discussed productively. If employees do not feel free to discuss their opposing ideas, then they may conclude that participation is a meaningless shell that does not deserve their commitment.

An introduction to conflict

While conflict can be highly constructive, I do not mean to imply that traditional organizational principles be turned upside down, that all conflict be encouraged, that responsibilities be ill-defined and overlapping, that employees express all their frustrations and anger fully, or that managers always avoid ending conflict decisively. I mean, rather, that managers and employees need the attitudes, values, expectations, and skills to make conflict constructive.

Figure 1 — Dynamics and outcomes of conflict



According to Deutsch in *The Resolution of Conflict* (Yale University Press, 1973), conflict occurs when the actions of one person are incompatible with those of another—one person's behavior obstructs, interferes, or somehow gets in the way of another.

Conflict occurs when people have competitive goals. In competition, people believe that their goals are negatively related—one person's success makes it less likely that the others will be successful. Task force members are in competition when each one wants to be considered the most important member. As one person makes a point, others feel frustrated that they may not be considered the most important. Competitors conflict as they try to reach their incompatible goals.

On the other hand, much conflict in organizations has nothing to do with competition and occurs when people have cooperative goals. People in cooperation believe that their goals are positively related; one person's success helps others to be successful. Task force members may believe that if some do library research and others interview, for example, they can all discuss their findings and develop an effective recommendation. Even so, they are apt to conflict. They may disagree about who should be interviewed, the best way to divide up their work, and their recommendation.

The key to conflict management is to understand that behaviors and actions, not goals and aspirations, are incompatible. For example, project team members can disagree over the best route for the transmission line. One person proposes one route, another opposes that route and offers another, which in turn is opposed. When they recognize they all are pursuing the cooperative goal of the best transmission line possible, and disagree only on how to accomplish that goal, they use the conflict to dig into the issue, explore each other's perspective, discover more information, discuss ideas, and create a solution that all can accept. If, on the other hand, they believe they are trying to win, to have their own position adopted, the conflict will be much less productive.

Approaches to conflict

In my research, I have identified three major ways to manage conflict (see the accompanying figure):

- the first approach emphasizes work-

ing it out together in cooperation;
- the second emphasizes winning and losing in competition;
- the third emphasizes avoidance and smoothing over of differences.

Cooperative conflict. People who emphasize their cooperative goals feel challenged in conflict. They are unsure that their ideas are adequate or that their interests can be fully met. Uncertain, they are motivated to understand opposing views and needs in order to satisfy their curiosity and resolve their uncertainty.

After explaining their position and exploring opposing views and interests, they come to understand the shortcomings in their own perspectives and to appreciate the desires and requirements of others. They try to bring in other ideas and aspirations and to develop a fresh viewpoint that is responsive to the reasonings, perspectives, and needs of others. Then they can reach mutually satisfactory decisions based on the ideas and interests of several people; their relationships are also strengthened, and they are confident they can resolve conflicts in the future. Throughout the conflict, people cooperate by considering the problem a mutual one, by holding everyone responsible, and by seeking a mutually advantageous solution.

Competitive conflict. The dynamics of competitive conflicts are much different. When they are confronted with opposing views and interests in a competitive atmosphere, people indeed may feel unsure about their own positions and try to understand other arguments. They defend their own position vigorously, however, and try to win over others. They prefer to find weaknesses in opposing arguments, rather than using the strengths of theirs. That way, they are able to counterattack, to undercut other positions, and to make their own views and interests dominate.

Competitors may conclude that they must use authority or other means to impose their solutions, and so the conflict results in failure to reach agreement. Instead, competitors accept an agreement that is imposed by the more powerful. In the end, the conflict creates personal ill-will and little confidence that the group can solve future problems. In competitive conflict, people want to win, pursue their own interests at the expense of others, and are willing to have others lose.

Avoiding conflict. When people avoid expressing their frustrations or opposing ideas, they remain unaware that others also experience conflict and have opposing needs, interests, and ideas. They assume that others agree with them, and see little reason to explore and understand other interests and opinions. Why should they bother to question their own position when those around them are apparently in agreement? Avoidance of controversy often results in inadequate solutions that reflect only the needs of one side. Avoidance can lend a sense of confidence in the work relationship, but because the confidence is baseless, avoidance undermines the capacity to identify and solve problems.

When employees emphasize cooperative goals, they realize the benefits of conflict and minimize its costs

The value of cooperative conflict

When employees emphasize cooperative goals, they realize the benefits of conflict and minimize its costs. Cooperative conflict contributes to effective problem solving and decision making. It motivates people to dig into a problem, encourages expression of many ideas (and the reasoning and information behind them), energizes people to seek a superior solution, and fosters integration of several ideas to create high-quality solutions not previously considered.

Cooperative conflict supports the management innovations of team assignments, personal relationships as business assets, and participative leadership. To managers contemplating such changes in their organizations, human resource development specialists can point out that these innovations require managers and employees to handle their conflicts constructively.

The following is a good example of what the human resource development specialist can do.

Tom had worked for Davon Construction as an engineer for more than ten years, the last two as a manager in the office-building group. He was a successful employee, but still struggled to find himself as a manager. A workshop and feedback from his boss had interested him in participative management, and he asked Jack, his company's human resource manager, for assistance.

Jack encouraged Tom and did more. He explained that participation required Tom to trust his employees to speak their minds and to disagree. Without such conflict, the full value of participation would be unrealized, and employees might think that the idea of participation is not genuine.

Tom could expect conflict, Jack said, but also he could take the bull by the horns by structuring open discussions. Jack's suggestions included:

- **Encouraging norms that all employees, regardless of their position, should express fully their doubts, hunches, and ideas.** The employees and he should talk about the value of discussing opposing views and read articles on productive conflict.
- **Indicating that major decisions will be made by consensus.** That fosters full participation; managerial decrees and strict majority votes work to suppress conflict.
- **Forming task forces to examine major problems and make recommendations.** Employees with different backgrounds, expertise, outlooks, organizational positions, and perspectives should work together to develop solutions.
- **Forming subgroups that take different sides of an issue.** For example, when he needs to decide whether to remodel their office or build a new one, Tom could assign one subgroup to defend the first option and another to defend the second. The groups would prepare their arguments and then together discuss their opposing positions. After a full discussion, the employees would drop their assigned positions and, using all the information and logic from both groups, reach a consensus solution.

Of course, Jack also talked about the importance of cooperative conflict to make these open discussions productive.

- **Tom should indicate to employees that these conflict discussions are to help them work for the good of all.** Employees can recognize and emphasize their cooperative goals throughout their discussions. They can consistently communicate that they are

working toward a mutually advantageous agreement.

■ **Tom can make it clear that he wants the department to be right.** He is not looking to see which person has the right answer or is the most convincing.

■ **Tom can reward the group for success.** Group praise, dinners, and bonuses all reinforce cooperation.

■ **Employees can attend communication workshops and in other ways improve their communication skills.** They should recognize each other's personal competence even as they criticize each other's ideas and positions. Disagreement should not be confused with personal rejection.

■ **Employees should influence each other without trying to dominate.** They may put forth their ideas forcefully but must listen to others and indicate how they have accepted parts of other positions.

Tom will not become a successful participative manager overnight. But Jack can support Tom's development by giving him ideas, structure, and guides to help his group manage their conflicts and make participation work.

Managing conflict

I have argued that attitudes toward conflict have a large impact on organizations, that innovations rely implicitly on the idea that conflict can be productive, and that employees need skills and procedures to manage conflict to make those innovations work. That reasoning also suggests that organizations need to change their designs, values, and leadership to manage conflict constructively.

Organizational designs that assign responsibilities to teams help employees recognize that they depend on each other and must cooperate to be successful. Cooperation helps them discuss conflicts openly and skillfully.

Organizational values and philosophy can also support conflict management. Employees should recognize that conflict is inevitable and that it can help them develop and maintain productive, meaningful relationships.

Participation also encourages conflict management. Rather than see conflict as a threat to their authority, managers can understand that their role requires them to help others discuss and use their conflicts productively. It is the manager's role to create the conditions in which people can express feelings and iron out difficulties rather than avoid or suppress them.

Human resource development specialists can play an important role in organizations by advising managers that innovations require productive conflict management. Managers and employees need procedures and skills to manage their conflict. The key is to discuss differences openly and to communicate and maintain the clear understanding that everyone pursues the interests and goals of all.

Conflict management is vital to rejuvenating our organizations and making them competitive in the marketplace. Every day, managers and employees disagree, fight, argue, and bicker. Such conflict is inevitable, but handled correctly, it can stimulate energy and creativity. Progressive managers are already experimenting and altering our organizations, and human resource development specialists can contribute to the revolution by showing how conflict management facilitates innovation.

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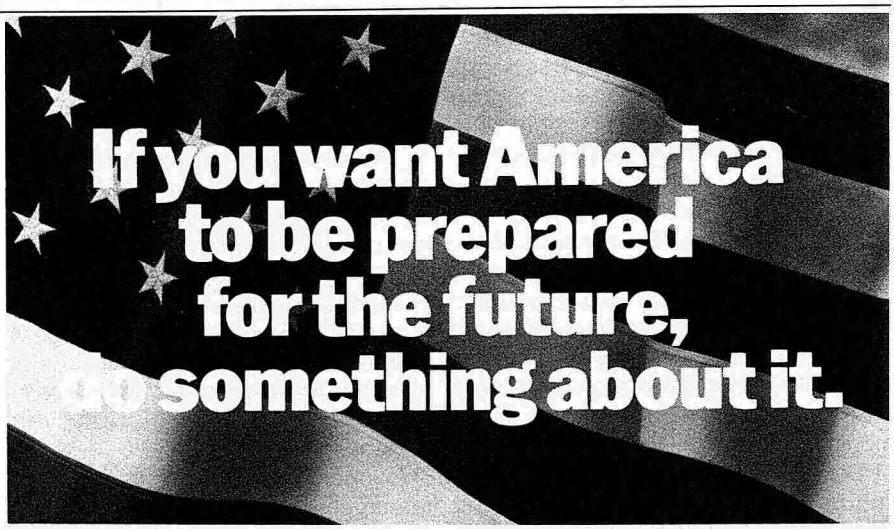

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