Training to Manage Conflicts

Today, good conflict management skills are necessary for all organization members—not just managers.

By ROBERT CHASNOFF and PETER MUNIZ

Ironically, unless we agree on the definitions of conflict and confrontation, the terms themselves can become a source of conflict. Conflict occurs between two or more parties when self-interests clash, the actions of individuals adversely affect productivity and/or working relationships, or unresolved controversy causes individuals to lash out at each other.

People usually speak of conflict and confrontation together. Images that come to mind are one party "shouting another party down," "telling the other party off," or "telling the other party that 'this is the last straw' and walking away." But, confrontation means something different. Confrontation is a systematic process or sequence that is used by parties who are in conflict and together are trying to resolve the conflict.

Principles and assumptions

Several basic principles and assumptions should govern the conduct of conflict management programs:

- Conflict is inevitable because of the many problems and ambiguities, as well as the opportunities for growth, advancement and change in contemporary organizations. The probability of conflict can increase with organizational size and complexity.
- Organizations function as a system of interrelated parts.
- To deal effectively with conflict, first identify its underlying causes and don't react merely to symptoms.
- All conflicts cannot be confronted. People at work do not have the luxury of unlimited time and energy. Decisions have to be made on how to select and how to apportion these resources. Individuals who go about confronting every issue without regard to value or importance of the issue may impede their own and others' productivity and fail to resolve some conflicts.
- When people succeed in understanding, confronting and resolving conflict, they may enhance both organizational productivity and interpersonal relationships.

While conflict resolution is useful, conflict prevention is more productive and easier

- While conflict resolution is useful, *conflict prevention* is more productive and easier, and generally requires less time and energy. For example, conflicts often arise when there is lack of definition or clarity about job roles among individuals, thereby calling for the need to confront and resolve. In such a case, definition and clarification of responsibility, authority and accountability *before* individuals start working together could better prevent conflict and increase organizational productivity.
- Conflicts related to work outcomes should be the target of attention.
- Experiential learning greatly enhances the potential of the workshop. Whenever possible, use at least one exercise or design that is "real life." An attendant risk, however, is that some people's learning styles cause them to have difficulty with the experiential approach.
- Third party conflict intervention skills may be just as important for some participants as are conflict resolution skills. Therefore, participants should be given the opportunity to develop or test such skills in a workshop.
- The trainer(s) must spontaneously model conflict confrontation and resolution skills during the workshop.
- Two key words—conflict and confrontation—must be defined clearly and explicitly to explain how they are used within the program.
- Conflict confrontation and resolution is complex. Gimmicks, simplistic formulas, catch phrases or training programs that do not take into account the complexity of organizations should be avoided.
- At certain times in some organizations the approaches described here can actually be dysfunctional. The approaches cannot by themselves easily solve, for example, problems relating to competence, power or willingness to change things, or long-embedded practices.
- In all organizations the issue of risk is significant and must be addressed.
- There is more than one approach to conflict confrontation and resolution.

Components and objectives

Conflict training programs must consist of at least three major components. Par-

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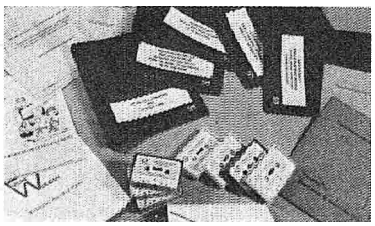

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ticipants should leave a program with the necessary concepts and skill practice:

- to determine the effects of unresolved conflict on organizational productivity and interpersonal/inter-unit relationships;
- to identify the causes of conflict;
- to confront and resolve conflict.

The program should be conducted in either a two- or three-day workshop. In the two-day program, work toward the following objectives.

Participants will:

- be able to list at least 10 organizational factors that cause or increase conflict;
- be able to list and define five modes for handling conflict and at least two possible results or consequences of each mode;
- given a conflict situation (such as a simulation or a decision-making task), be able to identify their own conflict-handling mode and its effect on outcomes;
- be able to state the four conditions for initiating a confrontation;
- be able to describe five steps of a confrontation sequence and the main task at each step in the sequence;
- be able to state and define at least five criteria for helpful feedback;
- gain skill practice in dealing with conflict.

A third day can focus either on application of the concepts and skills or third-party intervention skills.

The workshop consists of 11 units. Most trainers are aware of, or have their own method for handling, warm-up, contracting and results verification (Units One, Two and Eleven), so we won't describe our approach here. However, we usually try to connect warm-up activity with the main thrust of our workshops.

Unit Three

Unit Three concerns conflict and its impact on work outcomes (analysis and definitions). We open with a lecturette on decision-making modes used by groups: decision by an individual, decision by a minority, decision by a majority, decision by consensus and decision by unanimity. We state that in the upcoming activity the participants will have to apply unanimity or consensus.

We point out that in the activity the results and the process for achieving the results may be influenced by unresolved conflict. When we conduct a public workshop, the activity is generally a simulation. However, when we do the workshop within an organization, we frequently design a situation relevant to the organization.

After conducting the exercise, analyze and describe how the group handled the exercise—with special emphasis on the results achieved by the group and the process factors that affected the group's work. In connection with this analysis and description we distribute a sheet containing our definitions of conflict and relate the definitions to the exercise just completed and to organizational situations.

Unit Four

Unit Four identifies role-related factors that cause conflict. A classic example is cited: the conflict between line and staff groups. To introduce this work, participants are divided into small groups. Each group is given a card with the task printed on it: "Develop a list of possible causes of conflict between or among the following. . ." One underlined phrase, differing for each subgroup and governed by the composition and size of the workshop group, is selected from a list that includes the individual and the organization, departments or units, peers, boss and subordinate, sexes, and cultures.

The subgroup lists are presented and discussed. Our key point for this unit: If you know the possible causes of conflict in different situations or role relationships, you can more easily prevent, analyze, confront and resolve conflict.

Unit Five

Unit Five concerns organizational factors that influence conflict. The intent is to sharpen participants' awareness of how the organization itself can be the cause of conflict. The unit can be launched with a lecturette or can be presented in question. Handing out a list of factors and asking for additions is another useful introduction.

Whatever the approach, factors frequently identified are:

- organizational structure;
- how, by whom, and where important decisions are made;
- modes of dealing with conflict that are encouraged or punished;
- performance appraisal systems (those advertised and those used);
- level of an organization's development;
- types and distribution of power;
- clarity of mission.

The next task is to cite specific ex-

amples of how each factor may contribute to conflict and how, in turn, the organization's productivity is influenced.

Unit Six

Unit Six concerns the impact of individuals' values on organizational conflict. Individuals' values are the criteria people use to make decisions about themselves, about their work and about other people. We distribute a list of 31 values. The list includes items such as acceptance, accountability for important results, enjoyment, family and power.

Participants are instructed to check 10 of their deepest values. The next step is to ask the participants to study those selected, decide on one item to eliminate from the list, and then cross it off.

A second, third and fourth value are eliminated similarly.

Group reactions are now assessed. Participants are asked what would happen if we were to continue asking them to give up important individual values. The discussion generally highlights the following points:

- Different people have different values. Conflict emerges when different people strive for different priorities.
- There are problems when an individual's values are at variance with the values held by the organization, the hierarchy or the majority of people in the organization who possess power.
- Individuals can compromise on certain values but would "go down fighting" sooner than give up any part of other values.

Unit Seven

Unit Seven concerns confrontation in organizations. The focus until now has been placed on assessing the many factors that may contribute to organizational conflict. We summarize the previous units, relating inputs made by trainers and participants, and apply these to the exercise in Unit Three. Now, we direct attention to doing something constructive about organizational conflict. Training in this unit involves reading material, handouts, lecturettes and group discussion.

First we present the following additional factors that influence conflict and confrontation:

- a description of defensive and supportive communication climates;
- definition of five conflict-handling modes available to parties in conflict;
- guidelines for conflict management;
- sources of power available to individuals;
- negotiation strategies used by individuals in conflict;
- the definition of confrontation;
- conditions for initiating a confrontation;
- criteria for helpful feedback;
- anticipated outcomes of successful and unsuccessful confrontation.

Participants are given a step-by-step approach to confrontation (see Figure 1). This formulation defines a series of steps to be used by parties interested in confronting conflict. (The model applies to individuals and/or groups so the term "parties" in the figure may refer either to individuals or groups.) Basic to the use of the model is the assessment that there is a conflict and the willingness to use a problem-solving approach. Several points are stressed in the presentation. First, one or both parties may elect to reject the confrontation at any point along the way. For example, if party B refuses to participate at the beginning (step 3), the confrontation is unsuccessful. The same applies to step 4 if the parties cannot agree on who owns the problem. We also note that, even at the final step, one or both parties may decide not to resolve the conflict. We emphasize this because we want to ensure that participants recognize that the sequence is merely a useful tool which does not guarantee resolution unless both parties are willing and able to carry the sequence through all five steps and into resolution. We also emphasize that this sequence presents one of several possible confrontation models. Those developed by Isgar[1] and Filley[2] may serve people better than ours. Another point is that the sequence can be used by a third party who is helping two parties (A and B) confront each other. In this case, third parties must remain just that—third parties—without any vested interest in the outcome (other than that the conflict be resolved, if possible). As soon as the third party begins to side with one of the parties in conflict, the third party has become part of the conflict and is no longer useful. After this unit, participants are challenged to apply the concepts in the remaining units.

Unit Eight

Unit Eight concerns making and analyzing a group decision. Participants now decide how they want to use the time available for Unit Nine (usually one

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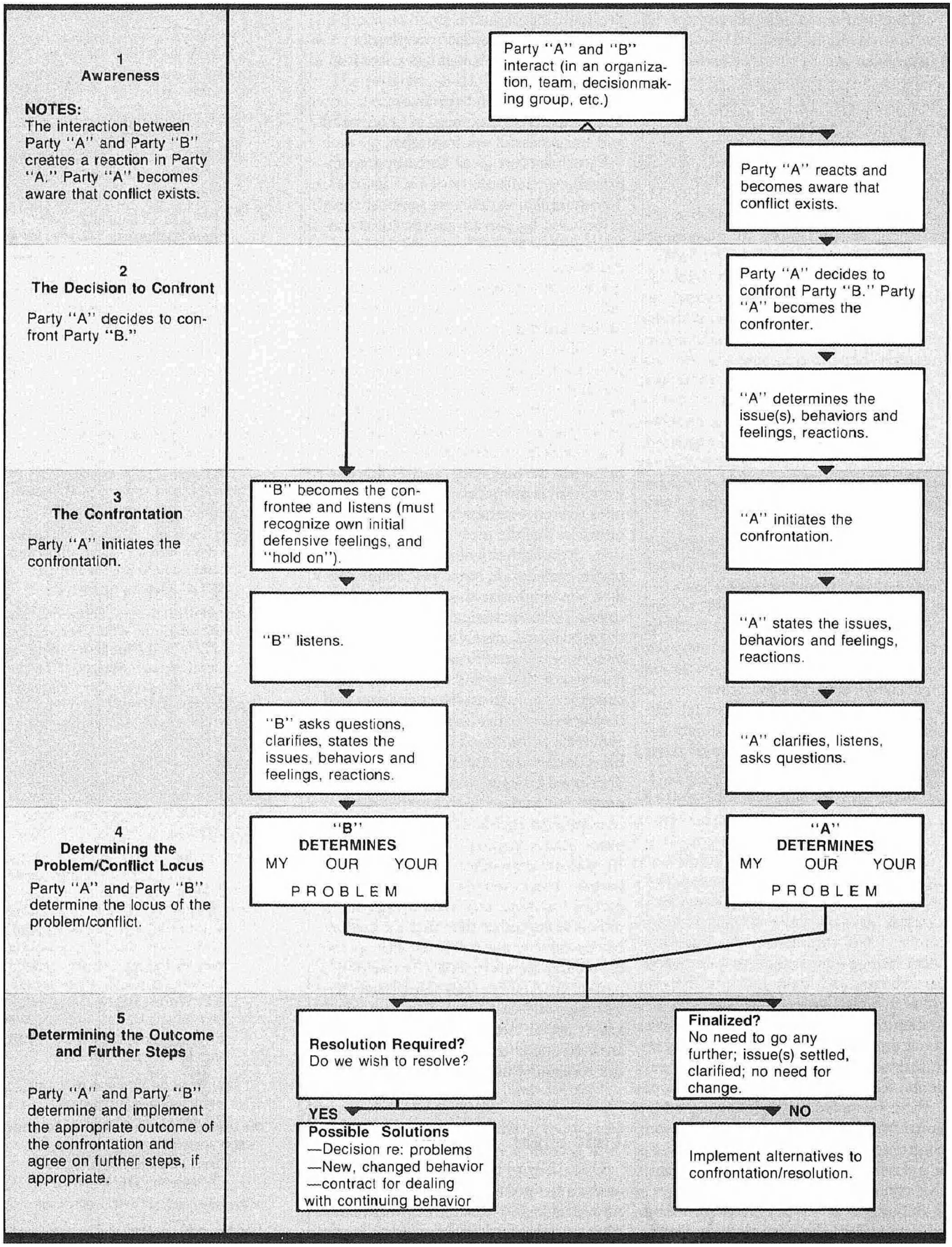
Figure 1—A Confrontation Sequence



half day). They make the decision after we present some possible alternatives. They are told that they do not have to limit themselves to these alternatives. They are also told that the activity will help them apply the conflict and confrontation concepts presented so far. After they make the decision, they are given an opportunity to analyze the results and the process, applying conflict and confrontation concepts to the decision they just made. The decision made in this unit is implemented in Unit Nine.

The optional third day is Unit Ten. When we conduct a third day, the focus then is usually on preparing and practicing for a back-home application, and/or developing third-party intervention skills for conflict confrontation.

Discussion

Focusing the program on organizational factors is more useful than considering only individuals' behavior. The confrontation sequence is also cited as a useful conceptualization that lays out a pattern of specific actions for confronting conflict.

The selection of prepared simulations versus the creation of proper relevant activities is an important consideration. We want activities that are helpful in creating proper amounts of conflict within the workshop as a basis for covering the major training components. There are many good sources for simulations and exercises.[3] However, whenever possible, exercises should relate as much as possible to the type of work done by participants and their organizations. The more realistic the conflict exercise, the more likely participants will be able to internalize the concepts and skills during the workshop and use them after the workshop.

A conflict confrontation training program can at once be exciting, self-revealing, self-confronting and frustrating. Conflict tends to be a focal point or lightening rod for many factors closely related to the work flow in an organization. Similarly, many organizations lack clear procedures for confronting conflict. In some cases a conflict workshop helps participants assess causes, confront and resolve conflicts. Making use of these means usually involves risk. Frequently, the risk-taking is justified by the anticipated results or payoff. In other cases, some participants are frustrated by the prospect of returning to organizations where, no matter how much risk they personally are willing to take, conflict resolution is impossible, inpractical or, may lead to significant negative consequences. The participants must judge for themselves.

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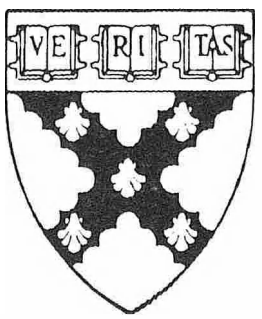

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