Severity and type of conflicts

For conflict resolution, we need to distinguish our approach depending on the severity and type of the conflict.

Small conflicts

Such conflicts only need a preparatory de-escalation step if one of the conflict parties feels intimidated by the anger of the other side and therefore does not speak up freely. In this case, conflict resolution can and should start straight away without any delay.

EXAMPLE

Boss: I have heard you can´t agree on the allocation of instrument time. Let´s go into my office and discuss about it.

In the office.

Boss: I want to hear both your opinions. Please refrain from commenting on the other´s point of view, you´ll get a chance to respond afterwards.

PhD student 1: I am having lots of samples at the moment. Most days, I start preparing samples first thing in the morning and then I measure them. The only rule we have in the lab for the machine is that we need to look at the waiting list after finishing and to tell the next person, that they can use the machine. This is what I do all the time.

PhD student 2: Fair enough, but my project is really at a very hot phase at the moment, we need to address the revisions of the journal where we submitted the paper. I have to bring my kid to the nursery in the morning, so I can´t come in early enough to be the first on the instrument. Sometimes I have to wait until 11 am until I can start my first measurements, and that´s really my limiting factor at the moment.

Boss: OK, thanks for these statements. Now, could you please comment on the other side? I´d appreciate if you could indicate a possible concession to the other side; this statement is not a commitment to actually make this concession, but we need to have everything on the table to start with.

PhD student 1: I am simply a morning person and like to use the machine when it´s still empty. That´s good for the whole group, it takes pressure off the busy hours around midday. But I do have a fair few waiting steps during my measurements. If you show me your samples the day before, I could get them ready for measurement during my waiting steps.

PhD student 2: Hmm, that´s very nice of you, that would already save me half an hour.

Boss: It looks like we´re making progress. I´d like to discuss the possibility of establishing a booking system, so machine time can be booked beforehand. There are lots of pros

and cons to such systems, so I think it´s important that we discuss it with the whole group. I´ll bring it to the next team meeting.

This is an abbreviated version of the mediation structure (see next eBook), which would be used in full length for bigger conflicts (see below).

Choice of **location**: even for smaller conflicts, it makes sense to discuss in a quiet setting. In other settings, any quiet listener forms a passive part of the discussion, as the conflict parties will care about what is being heard. And if too many **people** are **involved**, who are not vital to the discussion, it gets ineffective very quickly. Of course, general matters which are relevant to the whole group need to be discussed with all. In this case, the group meeting is the right setting, not an expanded hallway discussion.

In the beginning of the discussion, the conflict parties are being heard, first of all without comments from the other side. **Taking turns** is important, as quieter people get their say as well and don´t get dominated too much by more outspoken group members. **Delaying comments** until a later stage of the discussion means that both sides get their time to explain their side of the issue in a 'relaxed' setting.

The process of the discussion can make a big difference. In this example, the boss explicitly asks both students to bring all ideas they have in mind on the table, without committing themselves to these concessions. Such a procedure allows to '**expand the pie'** before finding, which elements can be used for a successful conflict resolution.

Bigger conflicts

These types of conflict necessitate to **de-escalate**, taking the heat out, before starting to solve the conflict. Speaking up, as peer or as boss, can be the first thing. This does not mean taking sides, as this would heat up the situation. Speaking up can make the conflict parties aware of the fact that there are others who might be bothered by the conflict and that the heat of the situation might be embarrassing. This de-escalation step is best described by the expression **'go to the balcony'**. Find or create some distance to the heated situation and try to get a perspective from the bird´s view. In any case, as conflict- or third party, the aim of this phase is to set a time and place for an in-depth discussion about the problems at hand. Both sides should keep peace until the meeting, calm down and make up their mind about what they want to achieve in this argument. By setting a timeframe, it´s usually easier for both sides to keep peace until then, knowing that they will eventually get a chance to speak up.

How long should the **delay be until the meeting**? If the conflict is a bigger one, one day later is usually best. Both sides can sleep over it, while a single day is not yet enough to lose sight of the issue. Only in extremely complex cases in which an additional party (external mediator

or HR department) is required, it will take you more than one day between the start of the conflict and the discussion.

Types of conflicts

In preparation of the meeting, it makes sense to distinguish which **type of conflict** you are dealing with. Each of these types requires an individual approach and offers different scopes about what you can hope to achieve.[1]

1. Instrumental conflicts

About: tangible issues, means, methods, procedures, structures.

Approach: problem solving.

Desired objective: solution.

2. Conflicts of interest

About: allocation of time, money, labour, space.

Approach: negotiations.

Desired objective: agreement (not necessarily the same as a solution to the problem, 'we agree to disagree', a peace agreement, which doesn´t necessarily have to solve the root cause of the problem).

3. Conflicts of value

About: political, religious, moral values.

Approach: dialogue.

Desired objective: understanding.

4. Personal conflicts

About: identity, self-worth, loyalty, breach of confidence, rejection, etc.

Approach: open communication.

Desired objective: understanding.

As you can see, many conflicts can not be resolved in the same way as a broken engine can be fixed. If deeply embedded personal values are touched upon, you need to be humble enough to limit your aims to fostering mutual understanding and acceptance of the other side´s behaviour, not agreement or a practical solution. Often, it is not even necessary to

change someone else, as a constructive work environment should be welcoming to a broad variety of people. Changing other people is even simply impossible in most cases- think about how difficult it is to change yourself.

If you are a third party in a conflict, you will get into the role of a **mediator**. As leader, you will have to assume this role on a regular basis. When to take this role and when to let people sort out the problems by themselves? There is no clear answer to this question. If the argument influences the work of the conflict parties or worse even, the work of others as well, it´s certainly time to get active. If you yourself tend to be a control freak, then you should leave your co-workers by themselves in less dramatic cases. If your preferred leadership style is more laissez-faire, then you should ask yourself if you´re making an active decision to leave your co-workers to solve their problems by themselves or if you just kick the can down the road. It´s certainly worthwhile to reflect on your style with others in order to find out if you tend towards one of the extremes.

A recurring tendency of scientists is to let conflicts happen without interference. The arguments for this are clear, your co-workers are mature people and you don´t want to be seen as an overbearing micromanager. On top of that, we´re all scientists, rational creatures who will, sooner or later, fall back to a clear focus on the work itself, leaving silly arguments behind us, right? No, this is a major trap. Thinking that rational creatures would not destroy their work environment for 'silly' reasons is naive. These rational creatures are often very passionate about their work and can put up a fierce fight if something gets in their way. As leader, you can be a good role-model by taking up the role as mediator and guiding your team in handling such delicate situations.

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[1] https://www.konfliktloesning.dk/artikel/17/presentation