Handout 11: Responses to Conflict

Conflict occurs when there exists a gap between two parties' perceived needs and wants. The existence of the gap causes the relationship between the two parties to sour. The parties may respond in a variety of ways:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Avoidance</th>
<th>Pretending there is no problem; avoiding the discomfort of confrontation</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aggression</td>
<td>Trying to bully or otherwise force the other party to change their position</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition</td>
<td>Trying to outdo the other party so they abandon their position; point-scoring</td>
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<tr>
<td>Submission</td>
<td>Giving in to the needs of the other party</td>
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<tr>
<td>Accommodation</td>
<td>Giving up on trying to change the situation, but not necessarily submitting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compromise</td>
<td>Agreeing to concessions so as to reach a solution that is inferior to that initially desired</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manipulation</td>
<td>Trying to trick, or outmaneuver the other party so they are unable to get their needs met</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict resolution</td>
<td>Actively seeking to satisfy the needs of both parties and minimise conflict</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Signs of Conflict

- Arguments, shouting, protests, tantrums, storming out, threats, abuse, physical aggression.

Other indicators are a bit more subtle, and reflect different styles people use when faced with conflict:

- Absence, complaining, joking, flippancy, moralising, pedantic logical argument, jumping to quick or extreme solutions, deception, undermining, snide remarks, loud declarations of opinion as if they were fact.

Causes of conflict

Conflict is almost always caused by people holding different opinions about a situation. The fact that opinions are tightly bound to our values and emotional states is what gives conflict its 'heat'. If it were only facts that cause conflicts we might easily investigate, find out the truth, and get agreement. Opinions, on the other hand, are about what people believe should happen.

Conflict resolution strategies include:
**Discussion**  
By simply talking about the problem two sides may be able to get their needs met, or find there wasn't such a gap after all.

**Problem solving**  
Using a series of steps parties to explore the causes of the conflict, and seek a solution, in a structured way.

**Counselling**  
A neutral third party facilitates discussion, taking care to explore participants' emotional issues.

**Mediation**  
A neutral third party assists parties to reach an agreement.

**Negotiation**  
A back-and-forth problem solving approach, often using a third party, which can also be used to prevent open conflict arising.

**Arbitration**  
A neutral third party considers the parties' positions and makes a judgment.

**Conflict Management**  
Not resolution, but making arrangements so unresolved conflict does not flare up destructively.

Strategies further down the table tend to have increasing formality and control over proceedings by the facilitator. Further up the table the strategies are more collaborative and generally result in more satisfied participants.