

Leading Competently through Conflict



What Makes Conflict Difficult?

Conflict is inevitable and we experience it in many aspects of our daily interactions. Yet, no matter how many times we've encountered it, dealing with conflict never seems to get any easier. Why? One reason is that in situations of conflict our primitive brains default to two reactions: fight or flight, neither of which is particularly useful in effectively addressing conflict. Another reason is that we often perceive conflict as a negative thing; but conflict can bring about innovation and progress. How do we learn to engage in the face of conflict and come out with the best results? Developing conflict competence can be the key.

Why it matters:

"People want leadership roles for a variety of reasons, but the opportunity to manage conflicts is rarely at the top of anyone's list."¹ Yet, conflict has high organizational costs and successfully navigating it is essential to our effectiveness as leaders.

Why is developing conflict competence important?

When asked about our first "lessons" in addressing conflict we often think back to childhood experiences with parents, siblings or playground buddies (or bullies).

Most of us built on those early strategies and attitudes and adopted corresponding behaviors to address conflict. Few of us, however, stop to revisit these default modes later in life. Even if we do, our habits are usually firmly ingrained and changing those behaviors takes a lot of effort and intentionality. Fortunately, it's never too late to work on developing your conflict competence.

Runde and Flanagan define conflict competence as *“the ability to develop and use cognitive, emotional and behavioral skills that enhance productive outcomes of conflict while reducing the likelihood of escalation or harm.”* This is why each of those elements is important:

- Cognitive understanding of how conflict begins and evolves can help demystify its impact.
- Emotions are at the root of every conflict and when they run high, we may end up lashing out or shutting down.
- Our choice of behaviors will escalate or alleviate conflict Let’s take a closer look at each of them.

Cognitive Skills

Conflict can be defined as a situation in which the involved parties perceive a threat to their needs, interests, goals or concerns. The word perceive has been underlined because it is often our unchecked assumptions that spark a conflict.

For the purposes of understanding conflict, it is also helpful to differentiate between task and relationship conflict. Task conflict relates to how something will be done. Task conflict often arises when there is diversity of thought; it inspires creativity, innovation and can result in true collaboration. Task conflict should be not only welcomed but encouraged within teams as it will bring shared accountability, buy-in and improved outcomes.

Relationship conflict, on the other hand, is not about content but about the people involved; it usually focuses on who is to blame for the problem rather than how to solve it. Relationship conflict thrives on dysfunctional personal interactions including gossiping, passive-aggressive behaviors and poor communication and left unaddressed, will undermine team efforts.

It seems clear that we want to encourage task conflict and eliminate relationship conflict, but it is very easy for discussions that promote constructive debate to devolve from personal tiffs to full blown fallings-out. So, where do you begin?

Emotional Skills

Emotions are the often-unseen conflict kindle. Developing emotional intelligence and being able to identify, understand and manage your emotions (and those of others) is, therefore, essential to conflict competence. Getting to know your “hot buttons” (behaviors in others that anger you and may cause you to react destructively) can be an excellent proactive measure. Do you find yourself triggered when someone exhibits traits that fit any of the following labels: unreliable; overly analytical; unappreciative; aloof; micromanager; self-centered; abrasive; untrustworthy; or hostile? Being aware that this is a hot button for you can help you anticipate and manage the emotions that observing them in others might trigger for you.

Behavioral Skills

Once you understand conflict and are emotionally skilled to address it you are more likely to succeed at managing your behaviors during conflict. Runde and Flanagan categorize conflict behaviors as constructive (they deescalate the conflict) or destructive (they fuel it).

Constructive Behaviors	Destructive Behaviors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perspective Taking – Putting yourself in the other person’s position and trying to understand that person’s point of view. • Creating Solutions – Brainstorming with the other person, asking questions, and trying to create solutions to the problem. • Expressing Emotions – Talking honestly with the other person and expressing your thoughts and feelings. • Reaching Out – Reaching out to the other person, making the first move, and trying to make amends. • Reflective Thinking – Analyzing the situation, weighing the pros and cons, and thinking about the best response. • Delay Responding – Waiting things out, letting matters settle down, or taking a “time out” when emotions are running high. • Adapting – Staying flexible and trying to make the best of the situation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Winning at All Costs – Arguing vigorously for your own position and trying to win at all costs. • Displaying Anger – Expressing anger, raising your voice, and using harsh, angry words. • Demeaning Others – Laughing at the other person, ridiculing the other’s ideas, and using sarcasm. • Retaliating – Obstructing the other person, retaliating against the other, and trying to get revenge. • Avoiding – Avoiding or ignoring the other person and acting distant and aloof. • Yielding – Giving in to the other person to avoid further conflict. • Hiding Emotions – Concealing your true emotions even though feeling upset. • Self-Criticizing – Replaying the incident over in your mind and criticizing yourself for not handling it better.

Can you think of a recent conflict situation in which you have been involved? Did you exhibit any of these behaviors? How did they affect the outcome? If you found yourself practicing destructive behaviors, the conflict most likely progressed, and both the task and the relationship suffered. Constructive behaviors, which require restraint, humility, curiosity, and effective communication, would have allowed for improved understanding and a better outcome.

Conclusion

Conflict Competence overlaps and benefits from mastery of many of the competencies in the UF Leadership Competency Model. Without the ability to competently handle conflict, a leader will have difficulty excelling at applying the knowledge, skills and behaviors needed for leadership excellence at UF. Mastering this individual leadership skill, by managing your emotions and behaviors during times of conflict, impacts your credibility and the level of trust that your employees, colleagues and superiors grant you. Beyond that, how you model and champion conflict competence can have a ripple effect in the norms and accepted behaviors--the culture-of your team, unit department, college, and all UF.

References:

Runde, Craig and Flanagan, Tim. 2013. *Becoming a Conflict Competent Leader*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass

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1. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/on-leadership/wp/2015/05/21/dealing-with-conflict-in-the-workplace/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.61e8c3052579