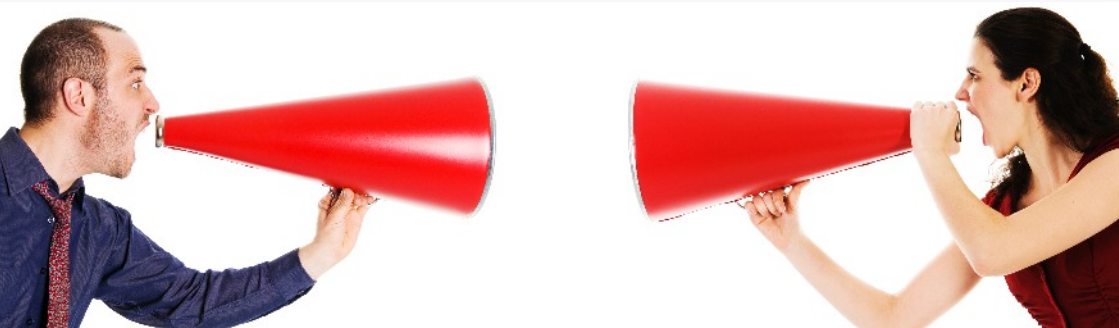


Why can't they just get along?

Understanding the causes of conflict in the workplace

A guide for managers and leaders
by Mike Lowe



Introduction

When you are in the middle of a conflict, it can be hard to see a way out. Conflict analysis is a useful tool to understand the different causes of the conflict and navigate your way towards a resolution.

Conflicts can be caused by various things, and often the thing that sparks the conflict is not the real cause.

The American psychologist M Scott Peck came to realise that most psychological illness is ‘over-determined’ – by which he means that there is more than one cause. He found that addressing the apparent cause of the psychological distress that one of his patients was suffering rarely resulted in a cure.

The same is often true in conflict. When trying to understand the causes of a conflict we may be experiencing, there may be more than one root cause. If we have tried to resolve the conflict but the conflict still continues, this is probably the case.

In fact there are four basic root causes of conflict, and each requires a slightly different solution. They are:

- 1. Different Information**
- 2. Different Interests**
- 3. Different Personalities**
- 4. Past Pain**

1. Different information

Sometimes conflicts come down to simple misunderstandings, where each person is working from different information about the situation. For example, two people have made an agreement but they both have a different understanding of what the agreement actually means. A husband thinks that he has arranged to meet his wife for lunch at 1pm, but she has been waiting since 12.30 because in her mind that is what lunchtime means. Or it might be something more complicated like a legal contract where each side has a different interpretation.

If there is any possibility that a sentence or phrase could be misunderstood, there is a very good chance that it will be misunderstood. Consider the sentence: 'She didn't marry him because he was rich.' Can you see the two different possible meanings? Or what about this line from Groucho Marx: 'I once shot an elephant in my pyjamas. How he got in my pyjamas I'll never know.' The English language is full of ambiguity.

*'I once shot an elephant in my pyjamas.
How he got in my pyjamas I'll never know!'*

Another example might be two different sets of assumptions about a situation. One person assumes that they are in a growing market while another assumes that the market is static.

1. *Different information*

We frequently make assumptions about each other's motives for doing something, which can also lead to conflict. I might think that the reason my colleague was asked to work on a particular project instead of me is because my boss has no confidence in me. In fact her reason may be that she has another more challenging project coming up that needs my skills.

Either way, when the problems come down to people having different information, the solution is quite simple: they need more communication until both parties are on the same page.



*they need more
communication
until both parties
are on the same
page*

2. Different interests

The second cause of conflict, different interests, is when two parties want different outcomes. This is just part of life and can't be avoided. We are all individuals with different preferences, tastes, desires and different sets of values. It gets particularly painful when the stakes are high as in when someone's job is on the line or large sums of money are involved.

The higher the stakes, the more intense will be the conflict. For example, if a group of work colleagues are told that one of their jobs will have to go – or if several are competing for the same promotion – there is potential for conflict. It's like two children fighting over the same toy or two dogs fighting over a bone. Only one can win and the others lose.



*like two dogs
fighting over
a bone*

It can be the same with teams or departments whenever there is a situation where one team gains at the expense of another team.

Within any traditional organisation, the sales/marketing departments will have different goals and interests to the operations department. Both will have different goals to the finance department.

2. *Different interests*

Whenever there is a merger or take-over, the potential for conflict is very high. Two teams with different cultures are told to become one team. In reality it often appears that only one culture can survive and so a win/lose mindset is created.

re-frame the situation and try to negotiate a 'Win-Win' solution

The answer here is to re-frame the situation and try to negotiate a win/win solution.

The re-framing comes from recognising that when we work together, instead of fighting, we achieve more, create more value and generate more business – which translates into more money (or other benefits).

The negotiation is about finding fair and reasonable ways to share that benefit so that everyone wins. It is important that the negotiations are totally transparent and that each party sees what everyone else is getting out of the deal as well as what they are getting. Only if all parties come to an agreement that they feel is fair, will they commit to it and make it work.

A lot of trust is required to make this happen and make it stick. Any party who negotiates without transparency, with the intention of getting the best deal for themselves and screwing over the other party, will undermine that trust. They might get a short-term benefit until the others realize they have been

2. *Different interests*

deceived. But in the long-term they will lose out because they are seen to be untrustworthy and will find it harder to reach agreements in the future.



A win-win always involves the risk of trusting someone

There are various tools and games available which can help individuals and groups understand how they approach negotiations. Many of us are so conditioned to a win-lose mentality that this is our automatic response. Because we expect others to be selfish and to try to screw us over, we reason that we should do the same. This inevitably leads to a lose-lose situation as neither side can achieve the trust required to build what needs to be built.

Looking for a win-win always involves taking the risk of trusting someone. It is true that they might abuse this trust. But it is even more true that another person is more likely to trust you if you can trust them first.

3. Different personalities

The third root cause of conflict is the clash of different personalities and personal styles.

Take, for example, two employees with completely different communication styles. Sonya is very ordered and detail oriented and likes everything to be in writing. Nick is more spontaneous and tends to communicate verbally – often catching people on the fly do to so. Not surprisingly Sonya and Nick often miss each other in their communication.



*We each have
different
communication
styles*

Nick will say something to Sonya while they pass each other at the coffee station. From Nick's perspective it is important information. But Sonya is in relaxation mode while she makes her coffee so it doesn't register. Or Sonya will spend time crafting an email in which every word is carefully nuanced, thinking that the email conveys in great detail the important information she wants to give. But Nick, who only sits at his computer for an hour at the end of the day, skims the email along with all the others in his inbox and only takes in a fraction of what Sonya wanted to communicate.

3. *Different personalities*

We each have different personalities and styles. This has long been recognized. The ancient Greeks recognised four ‘temperaments’ – sanguine, choleric, melancholic and phlegmatic. In ancient Chinese culture, as expressed in the I Ching, there are five elements: wood, fire, earth, metal and water, each with a corresponding character.

The pioneering Swiss psychologist Carl Jung read a translation of the I Ching in 1924 by his friend Richard Wilhelm and was immediately taken by it. He drew on this extensively, as well as the four temperaments, in his theory of personality. Many of the personality profiling tools in use today, including DISC profiles, Myers-Briggs, and the Kiersey Temperament Sorter, draw on Jung’s work. Another popular tool, the Enneagram, also has ancient roots in the Sufi tradition. Each of these tools has its particular strengths and focus and there is much overlap between them all.



William Moulton Marson, creator of the DISC profiles, also created the Wonder Woman comic-book character

3. Different personalities

More recently another profiling tool, Talent Dynamics, has been developed by Roger Hamilton, drawing directly on the I Ching as well as Jung's work. This is particularly useful for looking at roles within organisations and how individuals and teams can get into the peak performance state known as 'flow'.



Personality differences can lead to conflict when we expect other people to behave in the same way that we behave. For example, Tom likes to think of himself as a relaxed tolerant person who doesn't stress if someone arrives late. But if he is late for a meeting with someone who values punctuality, that can cause friction. Some people are good at starting things but not good at finishing. This can be very frustrating to tidy and detail oriented people who like to finish things by ticking all the boxes, dotting the 'i's and crossing the 't's.

3. Different personalities

Last-minute-merchants can upset people who like to carefully plan ahead. Risk-takers scare the hell out of more cautious types. People whose lives revolve around relationships and the fascinating lives of other people seldom see eye-to-eye with people who are task and goal oriented.

All of us tend to use ourselves as our frame of reference. We know how we would behave in a situation and we expect other people to behave the same way. When they don't, we often attach a judgement to that. Either our way is the 'right way' or their way is – in which case our way must be the 'wrong way'. And because nobody likes to be wrong, we usually choose to label the other person's behaviour as wrong instead – whether we voice that judgement or not.

labelling our own behaviour as 'right' and other's behaviour as 'wrong' inevitably leads to conflict

This mental labelling of our own behaviour as 'right' and other's behaviour as 'wrong' inevitably leads to conflict – even when it is unconscious and unspoken. Where genuine moral issues are involved – such as dishonesty, selfishness or inappropriate sexual behaviour, it can be important to speak out and confront the behaviour that is wrong. But where the issues are not moral issues, but results of our different personal styles and personalities, conflict is best avoided by widening our horizons and accepting that other ways of doing things are equally valid. Learning more about ourselves by discovering our personality profile, through one of the various tests available, is a great way to do this.

4. Past pain

The fourth root cause of conflict is past pain. In many ways this is the most difficult one to deal with. Probably all of us can recall a situation where a conflict simply appeared, as if from nowhere. Afterwards we scratch our heads and ask ‘what was that all about?’

Richard, a senior executive, had this experience one morning when his PA verbally attacked him in a prolonged rant over some extra work that had been divided up among all the staff following the unexpected departure of a team member. It was the first time she had ever verbally expressed disagreement in the two years she had been working for Richard. And that was probably part of the problem.



Suppressed and stored disagreements lead to resentment

In many cultures, people find it hard to express disagreement with those they perceive as ‘authority figures’. This is particularly true of women. The result is that when someone steps on their toes – whether literally or metaphorically – they tend to absorb the pain and say nothing.

4. Past pain.

But just because they don't speak up doesn't mean they aren't feeling anything. Thoughts such as 'this is unfair' or 'why am I being picked on' can lead to feelings of resentment and anger. Over time these can build up, until one day something happens which is seen as 'the last straw which breaks the camel's back' and the dam bursts. All the feelings which have built up over time are expressed in a fury of emotion.

The person on the receiving end of this outburst usually has no clue as to the build-up of events leading up to it. As a result they may feel angry at what they perceive is an 'over the top' reaction to the immediate problem. In Richard's case, the PA was given a written warning about her behaviour. This led to a frosty atmosphere between the two with little communication, and a few months later the PA left her job.

The level of trust determines the speed of communication

It is an axiom that the level of trust determines the speed of communication. Where there is high trust, there is a high flow of communication. Where there is low trust, the communication flow is reduced to a bare trickle.

4. Past pain.

And yet communication is necessary if we are to build trust. The moment when Richard's PA had her outburst was an opportunity for communication. Something was expressed on that day which hadn't been said in the years before: – the dissatisfaction and anger felt by the PA. For sure, there could have been much more appropriate ways to express that dissatisfaction. But it was, nevertheless, an opportunity.



When we are attacked we tend to go into 'fight, flight or freeze' mode

When we are attacked, we tend to go into 'fight, flight or freeze' mode. This is part of our evolutionary conditioning, and is an instinctual survival mechanism. However, the fight, flight or freeze reactions are associated with a different part of the brain to the frontal lobes which are our reasoning and problem-solving centres. When we feel threatened, or stressed, blood actually flows away from our frontal lobes into the more primitive parts of the brain around the brain stem. The results are not conducive to good communication and problem solving. We tend to either fight back, perhaps by shouting and verbally attacking, or walk away, or shut down internally. What we really need to do is to listen, to deepen the flow of communication and by doing so, build trust.

4. *Past pain.*

It helps if we realize that the outburst of anger we are experiencing is not about us personally and about the current situation. When we understand that something else is going on, then we can see these moments as opportunities for deepening communication.

There is other stuff going on ...

As human beings our lives weave together many different strands. As well as our professional lives we have our families, friends, pets and various social networks. We might follow sports teams or TV soaps. We might be struggling with health issues that no-one else knows about. Try as we might to separate our professional lives from our personal lives, at the end of the day we are one person and we are affected by everything that is going on. A person who is grieving over a beloved pet that has just died is going to be in a different mental space to a person who is feeling cocky because their sports team won the night before.

We bring to the workplace all of our stresses around our family relationships, money worries, health concerns. Even small things, like encountering an obnoxious and aggressive driver on our way to work or losing a favourite pen can have an impact on our frame of mind.

The history of past pain we bring into a conflict may also go back to formative experiences in childhood. The way each of us

4. *Past pain.*

sees the world is coloured by our own personal, family and cultural history. Patterns we experienced in our early years become programmed as general beliefs we hold at a subconscious level about the world and how we operate in it.

Some examples:

- Sita had an over-controlling mother who used shame and humiliation as her main methods of control. As a result Sita tends to be over-sensitive to criticism, and easily gets into a rage when she feels humiliated in any way. She is particularly sensitive to criticism from women in authority positions.
- Simon's father had a violent temper and used this to get his way whenever he was crossed. As a result Simon internalised a belief that in order to get what you want you have to get angry and shout at people.
- Charles was the seventh of eight siblings in a family with limited resources. Sharing and fair-play were essential for Charles to thrive. As a result Charles gets very angry whenever he feels that he has been treated unfairly or that an injustice has been done.
- Barbara's Jewish parents survived the holocaust. She grew up hearing the stories, always accompanied by warnings that you can't trust non-Jews – that you never know when they might turn on you. Although Barbara rejects this world-view at a conscious level, at a subconscious level she constantly feels different and somehow alien.

4. Past pain.

So what is the best way to deal with a conflict when we suspect that something from the past is being brought into the present?

avoiding escalation

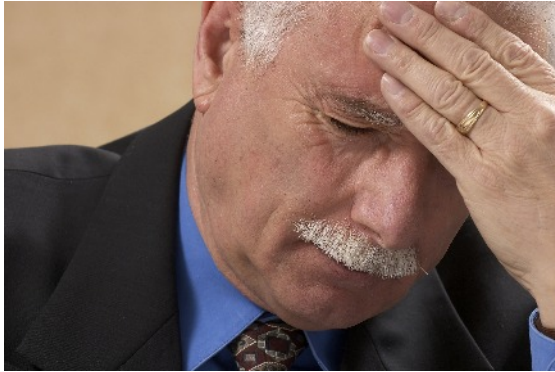
The most important thing is to try not to take it personally and to stay calm. If you feel that a person's reaction to a situation is like an 8 on the Richter scale when the situation only warrants a 3, then by reacting back with an equally strong 8 you share responsibility for escalating the conflict.



Playing the amateur psychologist is almost guaranteed to ramp things up a notch or two

On the other hand, it doesn't help to play the amateur psychologist and say things like 'you are feeling angry because I remind of you of your alcoholic father'. This is also guaranteed to ramp things up a notch or two.

4. Past pain.



When someone feels an emotion they often attach a story to it.

Emotions are always felt in the here and now. The ideas of past and future belong to a different part of the brain which is concerned with story. When someone feels an emotion, they often attach a story to it. So what they communicate has two aspects to it – the story and the emotion.

It's vital that they get a sense that their emotion has been heard, whether their story is accurate or not

To lower the emotional temperature, it is vital that the person who is feeling something strongly gets a sense that their emotion has been communicated; that whatever they are feeling – whether it is anger, shame, humiliation or sorrow – has been heard. Whether the story they have attached is accurate or inaccurate doesn't matter in terms of the emotion felt.

4. *Past pain.*

So, for example, if Ron is feeling angry and he attaches to that feeling the story that I deliberately withheld information from him, the best thing that I can do is listen and acknowledge that he is angry. Then, once the emotional temperature has dropped, it is possible to explore whether Ron's story is the whole story.

What happens if I argue back immediately? What if I say that I didn't deliberately withhold information and tell Ron that he is angry because of something else?

In this case, by responding to the story instead of the emotion, I communicate to Ron that his strong feeling of anger has not been heard. As a result, he feels even more angry. Whether I know the real reason for Ron's anger or whether I don't know, the result will be the same if I respond to the story instead of the emotion.

Ask questions, like 'is that the only reason you're feeling angry'

Once the emotional temperature has reduced, as a result of listening and responding to the emotion, it may be possible to explore other possible causes of the conflict. This is best done through asking questions rather than suggesting what you think is going on inside the other person's head. Questions like 'is that the only reason you are feeling angry?' invite an open dialogue which can build trust. Statements like 'You are probably angry because ...' are likely to lead the other person to feel judged and misunderstood – which kills dialogue and reduces trust.

5. Putting it all together

Most conflicts will have mixture of all these four roots mixed in together. The following questions can help to untangle the various different strands of the conflict to give a clearer sense of how to move forward.

In these questions, ‘People’ refers to one or more of the people involved in the conflict.

In cases where you don’t know the answer to a question, the first place to start is by gently asking questions to find out. I stress Gently! If you are not the most appropriate person to ask directly (because you are involved in the conflict or because you are in a position of power over the other person) then you may have to find an indirect way to get this information, for example through a third party who is seen as impartial.



In cases where you don't know the answer, gently ask questions to find out.

Conflict analysis questionnaire

Circle the numbers which most closely correspond to your agreement about the statements. Add the numbers for each section

Part A	Strongly disagree				Strongly agree
1 People have found it hard to freely express disagreement in the past	1	2	3	4	5
2 People are under particular stress arising from circumstances outside the workplace (eg bereavement, relationship problems, health issues etc)	1	2	3	4	5
3 People feel that this conflict situation is similar to previous difficulties they have experienced in life	1	2	3	4	5
4 There has been a history of mistrust between them leading to little or poor communication	1	2	3	4	5
Total Score for part A					<input type="text"/>

Conflict analysis questionnaire

Part B

Strongly
disagree

Strongly
agree

-
- | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | People have different communication styles | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 2 | People don't really "click". If they did not work together and met at a party they would be on different wavelengths | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 3 | They have very different personalities | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 4 | They find their different approaches irritating when it comes to things such as task completion, punctuality, social graces, innovation, looking good, risk management, following rules & systems | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

Total Score for part B

Conflict analysis questionnaire

Part C

Strongly
disagree

Strongly
agree

-
- | | | | | | | |
|---|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | People are in competition with each other | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 2 | For one to get more of what they want, the other has to get less of what they want | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 3 | They have different goals and can't see a way for each of them to achieve their goals together | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 4 | If one of them failed or gave up, the other(s) would be closer to achieving their objectives | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

Total Score for part C

Conflict analysis questionnaire

Part D

Strongly
disagree

Strongly
agree

-
- | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Some people don't have access to important information which might change their perspectives about the dispute | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 2 | People have different stories about the situation, based on incomplete information | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 3 | People have interpreted information in different ways leading to different understandings about the conflict situation | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 4 | People have not spent enough time talking together about the situation to come to a shared understanding about how things stand | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

Total Score for part D

Conflict analysis questionnaire results

	A Past pain	B Different personalities	C Different interests	D Different information
Total				

The totals above give an indication of the different roots causes of the conflict. The ones with the highest scores are where you might want to concentrate your efforts.

If necessary, read some of the earlier pages to refresh your memory on how to approach the conflict.



Find out more

This ebook is a chapter from the forthcoming book

Discover the Other ***- the 4 keys to better relationships in the workplace.***

For more reading

Everyone Can Win - Responding to Conflict Constructively
by Helena Cornelius & Shoshana Faire (2nd edition 2006),
Simon & Schuster

To take the Talent Dynamics Profile test

Visit <http://www.discovertheother.com.au/take-test/>

For more information



Visit **Discover the Other**
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About the author



Mike Lowe is the founder and CEO of Discover the Other, a consultancy and training company specialising in workplace conflict resolution.

Mike has 20 years international experience leading trustbuilding workshops and courses with politicians, police, former combatants, multicultural and ethnic organizations.

Mike has spent most of his working life with the international NGO, Initiatives of Change, which has a long history of building trust across the world's divides. Most of what he has learned has come from that tradition.

Highlights have included workshops for reconciliation among former militia commanders in Solomon Islands and with the Royal Solomon Islands Police. During much of the 1990s Mike was running leadership training programmes to help create trust and integrity in the former Soviet Union. That programme, called Foundations for Freedom, still exists as an international non-government organization based in Ukraine.

In 2002 he moved to Melbourne, Australia, with his wife and two sons.

Surveys show that conflict is a major cost for business, with managers typically spending between 20%-70% of their time dealing with conflict and its fall-out.

Why can't they just get along? is a brief guide to help managers and leaders understand and effectively manage the four root causes of conflict in the workplace:

- Different information
- Different interests
- Different personalities
- Past pain

Mike Lowe is a professional trainer and facilitator with 20 years international experience leading trust-building workshops and courses., including work with police, politicians and former combatants.



Discover the Other

Helping businesses unlock the potential of diversity in teamwork
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