

Conflict Resolution: What Works?

Dealing with conflict—with superiors, peers, or subordinates—is one of the most difficult challenges a manager faces. Conflict is inevitable in organizations, and the way it is resolved can have far-reaching consequences. Two popular but contradictory strategies for conflict resolution are the tough guy approach and the problem-solver approach. The tough guy is assertive, decisive, skilled at using power to force others to accept his solution. The problem solver is objective, egalitarian, skilled at creating a climate in which parties to the conflict can arrive jointly at a solution. Which is the most successful strategy? Our study of the conflict experiences of twenty-five middle-level managers with at least ten years of experience indicates that while both work, each is appropriate to certain situations. Organizations which use a single method of conflict resolution should probably reassess their practices.

The findings presented in this article are the results of a study conducted by five graduate students of business, from the Sloan School of Management at Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the Harvard Business School, under the direction of Professor Ralph Katz of Sloan. Using the critical incident methodology,

the study team interviewed experienced managers who were enrolled in the Sloan Fellows program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. These men and women, middle managers, thirty to forty-five years of age, had been sponsored by their organizations for a one year course of study at Sloan. Twenty-five Fellows were interviewed by a study team pair. Each described two conflicts from his own work experience, one with a “good” and one with a “bad” resolution. Incidents were analyzed and classified by the study team pair conducting the interview. The authors analyzed the results in depth, and drew the conclusions expressed here.

Methods of Conflict Resolution

Although the tough guy and problem-solver approaches were most frequently used, the managers also used compromise and avoidance. The methods and dynamics of the four approaches differ; each offers some benefits.

Forcing: The tough guy. One party uses superior power to impose a decision upon another party. The power may come from the manager's position of authority or from the backing of superiors. The situation may be structured

to gain power, or power may be gotten by winning over a coalition. The major benefit is that the issue is settled with finality (even if some parties are dissatisfied), or the cause of conflict is removed.

Problem solving: The joint-resolution. Parties to the conflict seek a solution which will satisfy the goals of each, first sharing facts and feelings, then searching for a mutually acceptable solution. The major benefits are a shared commitment to the solution, and the establishment of a basis to resolve future conflicts.

Compromise: the give-and-take. Parties to the conflict bargain to split the difference—each must give up something. Negotiations may be direct, or via a third party. The major benefit is that the compromise settles the immediate issue.

Avoidance: Don't make waves. Parties to the conflict withhold expression of true feelings and beliefs, and differences are glossed over. Confrontation is avoided. The major benefit is the advantage gained through the postponement of confrontation—to prepare the setting for forcing action, or to win over subordinates, peers, or superiors.

Causes of Conflict

Conflicts usually arise from problems in communication or personal relationships, or are inherent in the organizational structure. While conflict may include elements of more than one of these causes, the central issue usually fits a single category.

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Communication. Conflict arises because of misunderstandings due to semantics, unfamiliar language, or ambiguous or incomplete information.

Structure. Conflict is due to power struggles between departments with conflicting objectives or reward systems, through competition for scarce resources, or through the necessary interdependence of two or more groups to achieve their goals.

Personal. Conflict results from the incompatibility of personal goals or social values of an employee with the role behavior required by his job. Certain personality characteristics, such as authoritarianism or dogmatism, may lead to conflict.

Study Results

Structural conflict caused by struggles between departments or groups was the most common type described by study participants; next was conflict due to personal values or personality. Communication conflict was least common. The method most used to resolve conflict was forcing; compromise was used least. Table 1 summarizes the type of conflict and method used to solve it for the fifty-two incidents reported by the twenty-five managers in our study.

Table 1 lists the method used to finally resolve the conflict. In a number of incidents, the manager first attempted to use one method and when it failed, would fall back on another. Forcing was the most commonly used "fall-back" method. This does not imply that forcing is a universal panacea. In five incidents, the manager first attempted to force the decision but failed, and had to use another method to end the conflict. Table 2 summarizes these incidents.

The success of the method of resolution was evaluated by the manager relating the conflict. Participants in the study preferred forcing and problem solving. We found that the success or failure of each strategy was related to the type of conflict: problem solving proved more successful in settling conflicts caused by communication difficulties, and forcing was the only method used with any success in conflicts of

Table 1. Conflict Resolution Methods Used, by Type of Conflict

Conflict Resolution Method Used	Types of Conflict			Totals: Methods
	Communi- cation	Structure	Personal	
Forcing	2	10	11	23
Problem Solving	5	7	0	12
Compromise	0	5	0	5
Avoidance	2	6	4	12
Totals: Types	9	28	15	52

personal values or personality. Figure 1 shows how managers evaluated their own experiences with various methods of conflict resolution.

Forcing was considered good only half the time it was used. Problem solving was overwhelmingly favored *when* it was successful, but Table 2 shows that almost half the time it was not. (It failed ten times, was successful and rated "good" twelve.)

Further analysis revealed patterns in those situations where forcing or problem solving was successful. Certain elements were particular to conflicts resolved by problem solving, others to those resolved by forcing. It is the situation that determines whether forcing or problem solving will be successful, and the wrong method leads to failure or a "bad" resolution.

Successful Problem Solving

Problem solving was used, at least initially, in 40 percent of the incidents described. Situations in which problem solving led to "good" results shared certain characteristics.

Interdependence. The managers must work together to accomplish the task, and the success of each depends at least in part on the others. This provides motivation to jointly resolve task issues. One manager, a computer systems engineer starting a three-year project to install a computer for a forestry group, spent several hours a day for the first few months discussing issues and clarifying semantics with managers of that group. The need for problem solving to head off conflict over system design was clear, and all participants cooperated in the effort.

Mutual awareness of conflict or potential conflict. It is not necessary for both parties to be aware of the strength of potential conflict, but both must recognize that conflict exists in the relationship.

Table 2. Fall-back Methods of Conflict Resolution

First Method Attempted	Fall-Back Resolution Method			
	Forcing	Problem Solving	Compromise	Avoidance
Forcing	5			
Problem Solving	10	10		
Avoidance	2	2		

Open-minded attitude. Problem solving involves a joint exploration of differences to identify the cause of conflict, and a joint approach to resolve it. This works best when people are open-minded as to the causes of the problem and the best resolution. A director of engineering, facing a conflict over the type of tracking system to be installed, set up a task force of representatives from the engineering and finance departments, and three program team managers. Each wanted a similar, but uniquely tailored, tracking system; the director's goal was to minimize costs by standardizing system components. Discussions were open and objective criteria were agreed on. The ultimate decision was to use a common basic system with subsystem modification for each user group.

Willingness to ignore power issues. Give-and-take discussions are the core of the problem-solving approach and take place most easily between peers. Parties from different groups should be at about the same level in the organizational hierarchy. Problem solving can succeed among managers from different levels only if they do not make power a factor in the discussions.

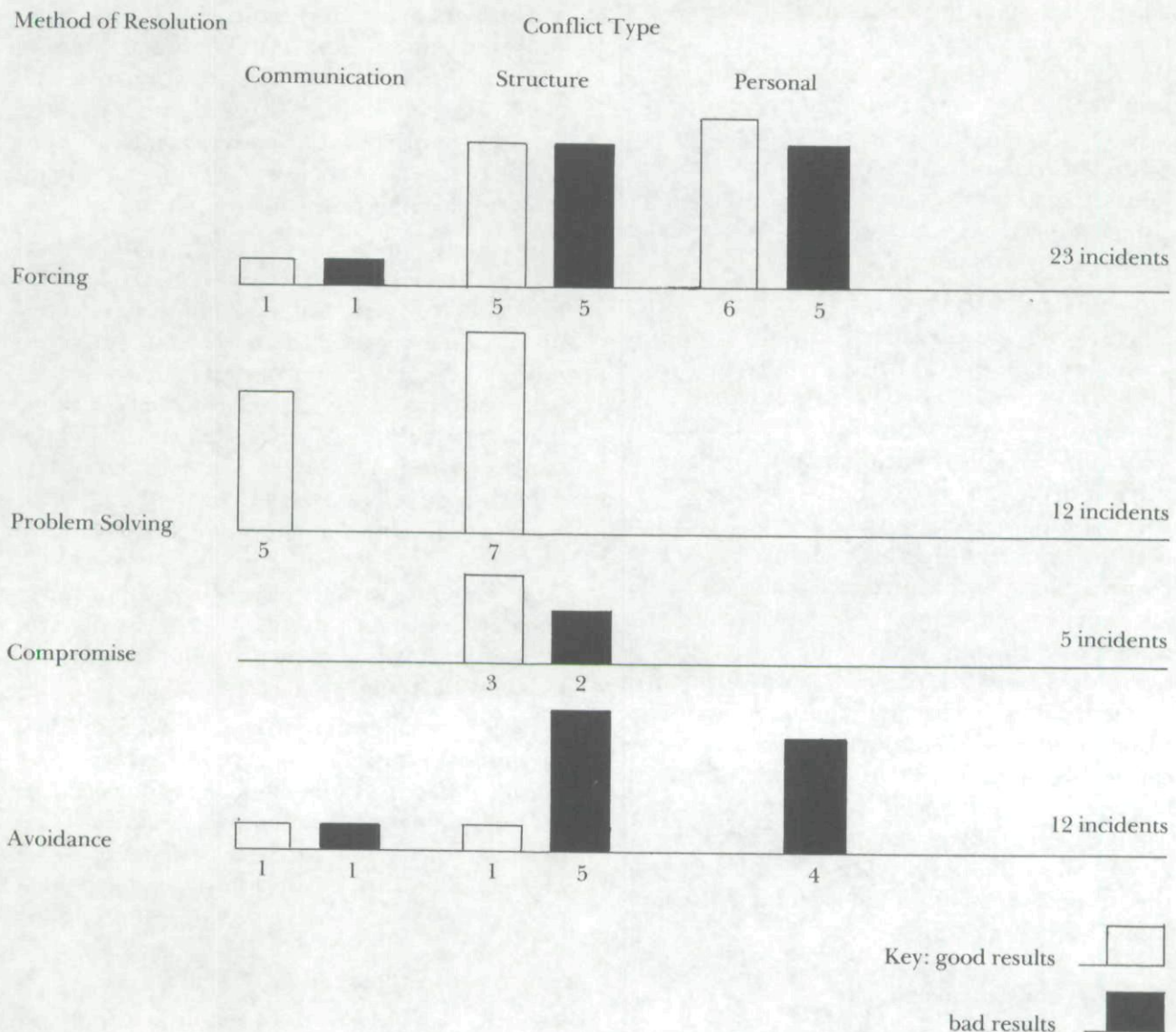
Existing problem-solving procedures. While not essential, the existence of procedures for handling recurring conflicts can be helpful. Many companies have established project review committees manned by representatives from each major department whose contribution is necessary to the success of a proposed project. The equality of the committee's members and its history of operating will be important in determining its effectiveness.

The Problem-Solving Process

Successful problem solving is characterized by several properties:

An early start. Managers who successfully used problem solving reported that the conflict was

**Figure 1. Outcome of Conflict Resolution
by Conflict Type and Method of Resolution**



not always obvious when conflict resolution began. The potential conflict was recognized by at least one party, who then initiated problem solving. A physician, charged with establishing a new state medical school, realized that professional and institutional jealousies were likely to be aroused. He identified twenty-five areas of potential conflict, then arranged a series of meetings with physicians and representatives of medical institutions to deal with these touchy issues in a problem-solving mode, before they erupted into bitter conflicts. If participants start dealing with conflict as soon as it is apparent, their minds are still open to hear the other side. While a long-smoldering conflict can be

successfully resolved in a problem-solving manner, this will require creation of special conditions. A junior in a consulting firm had been icily ignored by an officer because of a misunderstood action on a past assignment. Finally he found the opportunity to explain as they relaxed over drinks.

Focus on solving the problem. What matters is not the defeat of someone else's solution. One or both parties may have a preferred solution, but a mutual understanding of conflict issues should be established before developing a solution. Fair criteria, mutually agreed on, help to focus the problem. The manager using problem solving is aware of both the need to be fair

and the other party's perception of what is fair, regarding the solution and the procedures used to arrive at the solution. Task forces and review committees can accomplish this—if there are no power plays. In the case mentioned earlier, the director of engineering did not emphasize his power but focussed on mutual problems. In a similar case, an engineering director exercised his authority and insisted on his design, to the great dissatisfaction of the program managers.

Desire to solve the problem. The parties take pride in resolving the problem themselves, without going to higher authority. Calling in higher authority would change the power balance and could destroy the mutuality so important to problem solving. Participants must believe in the importance of each other's contributions to the resolution. That one's success is dependent on the work of another over whom one has little control can be a powerful motivator for problem solving. Both participants must realize that a noncooperative work relationship would undermine the success of each. In one incident, a union filed a complaint against a manager upon hearing that he was considering a new service—which it viewed as a scheme to increase job responsibility. Ignoring union-management power issues, the manager was able to show the union leader the advantage to the union of the additional customers the service would attract.

Benefits and Obstacles

Several managers in our study expressed satisfaction with problem solving. Why did they like it? Problem solving establishes a basis for future conflict resolution, creates good working relationships, and can reduce the tension of conflict—people are listened to, the focus is business, and the goals are organizational, rather than political.

Where can problem solving go wrong, as almost half of the attempts did? Two obstacles are delay and threatened personal values.

Delay in dealing with conflict permits the situation to deteriorate. Open minds close, positions harden, and people lose their desire to find the “best” solution. Antagonism builds and de-

stroys trust. The longer the delay, the more unfavorable the climate for problem solving.

When personal values are affected by the conflict, and those values permit only one solution, the situation becomes a clash of principles. Because the conflict has polarized into a win/lose situation, only two alternatives remain. Either participant may back down, or one participant may resolve the conflict through forcing.

Even though problem solving was most satisfactory to the managers when it worked, three-fourths of the reported incidents were resolved by another method. Forcing was employed most often, but compromise and avoidance were also used. Compromises were usually made between peers, equally powerful and obstinate. Avoidance often occurred in superior-subordinate relationships in which the superior made a decision that the subordinate did not like, and when the superior did “not want to hear about problems.” The subordinate avoided conflict primarily because he felt that he had little power. Thus, avoidance is the antithesis of forcing.

A major consideration in selecting a resolution method was the amount of power that the protagonists had or could obtain. This power could be derived from three sources: authority of position; social influence, via performance and office politics; or possession of vital information.

Successful Forcing

Forcing was used to resolve conflict in almost half of the incidents. It requires that the manager have power to force another into accepting his proposal, and in most cases involved a superior-subordinate relationship. A manager could force a peer to accept his position only if he had vital information or social influence. Otherwise, he had to take the issue to a superior.

As with problem solving, forcing was successful in certain situations.

One best way. When organizational goals and policies support one solution to a conflict, forcing is likely—there is no use for problem solving. Forcing an unpalatable decision can be rewarding when that decision proves right and

is accepted. A manufacturing manager for international operations had to force the distribution managers in four countries to adopt the same pallet for international shipping. After a year, the cost savings and simpler logistics were apparent. The managers decided to bury national rivalries and seek further benefits from common practices.

Values conflict. A subordinate's performance is unsatisfactory: he will not implement a new policy; his attitudes and conduct vary substantially from corporate norms; his goals are incongruent with organization's. Forcing is probably the only way to end the values conflict, with the less powerful being transferred, fired, or made so uncomfortable that he leaves.

History of conflict. Two groups refuse to cooperate because of old issues, are subject to mistrust and poor communication.

The Forcing Process

Forcing achieved an immediate resolution in almost all cases; yet in half the method was considered "bad." The characteristics that distinguished "good" from "bad" forcing were the fairness of process, the objectivity of the decision-making criteria, and the benefit to the organization.

Fairness. Fairness was demonstrated in a number of values conflicts in which the manager disciplined or fired an employee. An admissions officer, responsible for coordinating the alumni student recruitment program, found that the head of regional alumni association opposed the university's policy for minorities and women. As this association was important to the implementation of the policy, the admissions officer decided that he needed an alumnus who supported it. The officer asked the alumnus whether he would administer a policy that he personally opposed—No; then moved to force the alumnus out of the recruitment program through letters and meetings between the alumnus, himself and other alumni. The admissions officer wanted to ensure that the regional alumni heard his side. The alumnus resigned a few months later and the other alumni felt that the university had acted fairly with no loss of support in the re-

gional organization. In general, concern about the response of other people affected was important in resolving the value conflict.

Objectivity. Objectivity was important in incidents that involved groups with a history of conflict. Often the manager intervened to change the working climate so groups would bury past antagonisms. Conflict between departments in a subassembly plant led the plant manager to create an arbitration procedure. Conflicts that could not be resolved by the departments could be arbitrated by the plant manager, a structure accepted as fair by the departments.

Confronting the issue. Forcing was more often successful when the solution benefitted the organization, rather than one person or a small group. One of the principal lessons of these incidents is that a manager must develop a strategy for the presentation of his case. Timing and the approach can be just as important as factual data. The head of nursing in a hospital attempted to gain control over the clerical units on which her staff depended, to improve efficiency, but was unable to persuade the hospital administrator. She reopened the issue at the annual budget committee review. The clerical section was arguing for additional personnel; the nursing director's presentation focussed on the cost savings of her plan for administrative efficiency. The budget committee approved the takeover, and she reduced administrative costs while improving the efficiency of her own group and the clerical units.

Feedback is essential. Forcing has its drawbacks, primarily the risk of deteriorating morale. Losers were often dissatisfied, especially in cases of no feedback as to why a subordinate's ideas had been rejected. The subordinate did not know whether the decision was objectively or subjectively based, and usually suspected the latter.

Follow-up. Even if a decision is fair, objective, and explained to the subordinate, it still may not be carried out, especially if a losing subordinate is instrumental in the implementation. The president of one large corporation approved some product changes submitted by the vice-president for sales over the objections of

Table 3. Choosing a Resolution Method: Situational Indicators

Indicator	Use Problem Solving	Use Forcing
Conflict issue	Goal agreement Joint work relationship Good communication	"One best way" Values conflict Scarce resources Subordinate discipline
Power relationships	Peers, equal power Coalition Power not an issue	Superior-subordinate Unequal political power Control of resources
Existing procedures	Review committee Objective criteria Equal representation of involved parties	Arbitration method Adjudication committee No agreement on criteria Unequal representation of parties
Climate for resolution	Trust, regard for others Open-mindedness History of problem solving No previous history of conflict Group goals oriented to corporate goals	Personal antagonism History of forcing Continuing and bitter conflict Strong adversary relationship
Potential for recurrence of conflict	Conflict inherent in structure of situation Need for ongoing conflict resolution	Eliminate recurrence by task change or removal or transfer of personnel

the vice-president of manufacturing. The vice-president of manufacturing, who was responsible for implementing the changes, used the budget appropriations process to ensure that he never received the funding to make the changes. More than a year later, the changes in the manufacturing process had not been made. Follow-up is necessary because subordinates who do not support a solution may subvert its implementation. Power may win the battle, but power must also be exercised in the aftermath.

Is forcing faster? It is popularly believed that forcing is a quick and neat way to resolve conflict, "get it over with." This was not true of the incidents reported. The manager who used forcing had to plan to consolidate power and assure implementation of the decision. Often as much time and energy was required as is for problem solving.

Tough Guy or Problem Solver?

Which is the role to take to resolve a conflict—Tough Guy or Problem Solver? Each can result in a good resolution when used in an appropriate situation with the right process, and each will fail in certain situations. If an organization strongly favors one method, there will be conflicts with which managers will have difficulty. Managers should be encouraged to develop

facility in both approaches. Forcing and problem solving are not personality traits, but skills that can be learned.

The study results revealed five characteristics of situations that indicate the preferred resolution method: the conflict issue, the power relationships, the climate for resolution, the existing procedures for resolution, and the long-term potential for recurrence of the conflict. A manager can analyze these five factors to determine which method has potential for "good" conflict resolution (see Table 3). When the indication is not straightforward, the manager must weigh the relative importance and strength of the characteristics and judge which method seems best. Once the method is selected, the process of conflict resolution should be planned to include the characteristics mentioned previously.

Guidelines to Conflict Resolution

Based on analysis of the experiences related in our study, there are four stages to good resolution of conflict.

Facing up to conflict. The manager should be alert to the possibility of conflict. Study participants reported what happens when a manager does not face up to conflict: delay may result in limited options. One manager ignored diffi-

culties his subordinate was having on a new assignment, then unsuccessfully attempted a problem-solving approach. People refused to discuss the problem and he had to reassign the employee, a forcing resolution, without ever discovering the cause of the conflict.

Planning the resolution. While spur-of-the-moment resolution may be necessary for many minor conflicts, there are usually several hours, days or weeks to analyze the situation, select a method, and develop a strategy for resolution of a major conflict. The process must include those who are affected by, or who will be essential to implementing, the resolution. Leaving out a key person may lead to an impractical resolution which ignores important issues or fails to provide motivation and means for implementation. As a final check, it is useful to think ahead to what will happen during and after the resolution. How might the reactions of the other party change the planned strategy?

Implementing the plan. In many ways, this is the hardest stage of conflict resolution, requiring the most energy and attention. However, if the plan has been made carefully, there should be few surprises. The conflict issue must be made clear, in the case of forcing, and agreed upon, in the case of problem solving. The perceptions and motivations of the other party should be considered in determining which facet of the issue to emphasize. If a participant is unaware of the conflict, he must be convinced of its importance. The process essentials of the

method being used must be kept in mind. An early start, joint conflict resolution, and obliviousness to power issues are keys for problem solving. Successful forcing requires an effective use of power, the maintenance of a convincingly fair and objective approach, feedback, and follow-up. Study participants reported situations involving a superior-subordinate relationship, in which resolution of the conflict was undecided and low morale resulted. The subordinate did not understand what had happened. If the situation changes and the conflict issue becomes irrelevant to the superior, this should be made clear.

Following up. Once the issue is resolved among those parties directly involved in the conflict, the manager needs to ensure that the conflict does not linger on. Subordinates accept a forcing decision more readily if they understand the issue, perceive the criteria for decision making as objective and the resolution as fair. An advantage of problem solving is that the people who are needed to implement the resolution are involved in the resolution process. Implementation is assured as long as the crucial conflict issues have been addressed.

Conflict is inevitable in organizations. The managerial task is to permit conflict to serve a productive function, to focus business issues and reveal inconsistencies of work tasks, faulty communications, and other hindrances to organizational effectiveness.

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