



In conflict zone, learn how to conquer

To achieve success, organisations are trying to instil skills in their staff to balance conflict with practicality

By K Jayshankar



The newspapers are full of it, and so are the television channels with the harsh images screaming at us – intense conflict is everywhere. It is amazing to see how human civilisation has survived so far, given our propensity to violence, often at the smallest provocation.

Given the fact that organisations are an important part of an individual's competitive life, conflicts are prevalent here.

Companies have sought to instil skills in their staff to balance conflict with practicality in their pursuit of success. Let's take a look at how this is done.

Definition: A quick and simple definition of conflict is to consider it to be a disagreement between individuals or groups, where goals or desires are perceived as incompatible. In its mildest form it takes the shape of friction between individuals or parties, and in extreme cases, we know it takes a violent turn through battles and warfare. In business too it exists, primarily in the form of competition, both 'normal' and in 'acute' terms. When it becomes 'marketing warfare', companies are known to use both foul and fair means to score over their opponents. Thus, it does appear that differences are a constant element of any interaction involving two or more people. It also means that organisations are composed of unique individuals with their own personal foibles, hidden behind their business roles and responsibilities; conflict is an ever present undercurrent. Some deny this reality, and carry some myths about conflict.

Myths: Conflict should not happen and can be avoided. However, in our imperfect world, given the diverse challenges of a power-packed and stressful business environment, conflict is inevitable. Refusal to see its existence is an ostrich-like behavior, and only gives rise to bigger problems in the future.

Another myth is that there is only one winner at the end of any conflict. The fact is that successful negotiation can create outcomes to meet the needs of both the parties. It is not an easy exercise but well within the realm of possibility.

Resolution: To resolve conflicts, it is important to examine why conflicts occur. Essentially, there are four reasons, either in isolation or existing in combination of multiple factors. These are:

1. *Inaccurate or incomplete information:* With the vast access to information through the Internet, there is often a scope for mischief. Scam messages are passed as a gospel through chain circulations, in the belief that when information passes through a large number of hands, it gets sanctified as correct and is easily accepted by naïve believers.
2. *Inappropriate or incompatible goals:* The emphasis is on the latter, as vested interests can pursue their private agenda, with departments in organisation being more committed to their functional goals and ignore larger organisational purposes.
3. *Ineffective or unacceptable methods:* This is often due to the desire for quick fixes, which leads to questionable means that sooner or later spells trouble for a firm. Examples are too many to recount – the business press is full of them!
4. *Antagonistic feelings:* Where personal egos become the primary hurdle to rational relationships.

While compromise is often considered a negative word, during negotiations it is best understood as making and / or receiving concessions. Consequently, there are many methods of resolving conflicts and specific solutions depend on the situational facts of the case. A widely accepted model is that of Thomas Kilman, which offers five approaches – Accommodation, Avoidance, Collaboration, Compromise and Competition. These are created through the interplay between concern for one's own needs (the assertiveness dimension) and concern for other's needs (the cooperativeness dimension).

So, while acknowledging that conflict is an underlying possibility at all times in our interactions, we need not be a victim to circumstances. A careful analysis of the situation can enable us to use one of the above strategies appropriately. Our skill lies in reading the situation well and appreciating that there is not one uniform approach at all times. Our adaptability quotient needs to be high to come on top of conflict situations.



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