ALTERNATIVE COURSES TO CONFLICT MANAGEMENT:
SITUATIONAL, COGNITIVE, SPACE AND TIME DIMENSIONS

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Abstract
Conflict management involves a multilayer, inter-party, action-reaction process in order to
eradicate or deal with friction within specific space and time environments and dimensions. In
theoretical and practical terms it aims at reshaping or reformulating negative input and
eventually turning it into positive or manageable ones. The process is nominally going to
produce non-zero-sum games and allow parties to adopt workable stands, positions and
cognitive attitudes through among, other things, behavior changes and cognitive re-
evaluations. Conflict management demands action in a complex situation most often within a
limited time dimension. As set by a number of scholars in the past the aim is not to seek a
perfect solution but a workable solution and this is of paramount importance.

Keywords: conflict, conflict resolution strategies, conflict dimensions

JEL classification:

Defining a conflict situation
Defining descriptively, cognitively and situationally the term conflict is important but also
painstaking. It will allow negotiators/mediators to scrutinize the operational, situational
and cognitive elements of a conflictual situation. At the same time it will be evident that an
accurate description of conflict is at times difficult and may simply provide an over-
simplified approach.

A situational definition “emphasizes the conditions that breed disagreement”, thus
looking into the specific situational and cognitive conditions and cognitive elements that
produce conflict. A cognitive based definition focuses on perceptions and feelings arising in a
conflictual situation, such as stereotypes, hostility and antagonism. By contrast behavioral-
based definitions focus on “resistance” or “overt aggression”. Conflict is inherent, inter allia,
to human activities, inter-personal interaction and inter-state relations in situations where
incompatibility of interests and/or values is present and affects choices by limiting
alternatives. It is also endemic in international relations and defines qualitatively state
relations, thus setting state choices between a spectrum of war and peace, cooperation and
conflict.

In these situations perceptions and misperceptions along with expectations provide an
evaluation and cognitive framework of scrutinizing the other side’s intentions, particularly
within an organization setting. One of the main axes of looking into a conflict is the degree

and conflict management: Reflections and update Kenneth W. Thomas.
3 See Brown D. L. (1983), Managing conflict at organizational interfaces, Reading, Mass.:
Addison-Wesley, p. 4.
4 Ibid.
Quarterly 12:2, pp. 296-320.
6 For a theoretical framework of analysis see Schellenberg A. James (1996), Conflict Resolution:
theory, research, and practice, New York: State University of New York Press.
7 See Bomers B. G. & Peterson B. Richard (1983), Conflict Management and Industrial Relations,
of incompatibility of views and the environment(s) it evolves. These are crucial intermingling spatial and time factors that will define communication potential and above all eventual outcomes.

The variety of suggested definitions of conflict proves the differentiation axis along which conflict and its evolutionary stages is scrutinized. These space milieus produce conflicts that involve some form of interaction. Alternative definitions define conflict as a “process in which one party perceives that its interests are being opposed or negatively affected by another party” or “the interactive process manifested in incompatibility, disagreement, or dissonance within or between social entities”.

**Conflict in a corporate environment**

Due to human interaction conflict is inherent in a business environment where attitudes differ as far as courses of action are concerned. In cases related to organizational conflict the task of dealing with incompatibilities and divergence of views is great and demands clarification of conflicting attitudes and communication skills. Unless it is under control it may critically affect or even threaten the very operating mode of a business or the outcome of a selection process due to diverging views operating as centrifugal powers.

In many cases the dichotomy between “me” and “them” or “us” and “them” reveals the setting of the situational burden a mediator has to take. It requests the application of negotiating strategies on the part of dispute resolution practitioners and their deep understanding of the issues at hand. These may be of substance but they may also constitute plain incompatibilities based or mis-perceived goals and courses of action. Under this spectrum a deal on a minor issue may open up options for a general accord (the piecemeal approach).

**Causes of conflict**

Causes of conflict may differ and apply to varying situational behaviour of individual or teams. At the epicentre of all these forms of conflicts lay differences in preferences, choices,

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8 For a practical approach based on psychology see Kirschner Rick (1987), *How to deal with difficult people*, Career Track Publications.
10 See Likert, Rensis (1976), *New Ways of Managing Conflict*, Mcgraw-Hill
alternative courses of action, resources\textsuperscript{21} means to be used, implementation of policies, divergent interests, conflicting needs, stereotypes or when the parties involved are interdependent in performing their duties\textsuperscript{22}.

In organizational environments conflict may affect effectiveness and productivity as well as team operational mode\textsuperscript{23}. Under conflict circumstances individual and team behavior constitute major impediments to organizational efficiency. In these cases leadership and managerial efficiency is tantamount in providing solutions and reaching agreements.

Managing a conflict means producing desired outcomes and sustainable solutions under time pressure. The mediator’s skills are essential to this goal. In situations where states are involved mediators are expected to have deep knowledge of the opposing views of those involved, as they express opposing wills. What is common in several aspects of conflict is ambiguity. This refers to the cognitive elements of formulating views and approaches. Ambiguity may operate as a procrastination, mis-perception and/or distortion factor. Procrastination in making choices and meeting the other side halfway or distortion of the other side’s intentions constitutes a major setback to conflict management and avoidance of escalation.

The mediator wishes to affect “not what those involved say but what they think”\textsuperscript{24} in an effort to affect evaluative judgements. In effect this implies a cognitive or perceptual involvement. These mediating “activities” are “investments in attitude, values and perceptions”, eliminating mis-perceptions and building bridges of understanding. The aim is to make those involved change their mind “with regard to what they have done or threatening to do”\textsuperscript{25}.

On its part a negotiator is trying to get the best results under the particular pressing circumstances and cognitive limitations. This is often evident in international relations conflict management efforts. In many cases efforts are made to start negotiating a small agreement, where nominally consensus can be found more easily. This practice has a number of pros and cons mostly but not exclusively found in many aspects of inter-state conflict. Pros can be summarized as follows:

It sets a limited objective first, which is easier to achieve due to its nominal lesser value to those involved. In a way the starting point is decisive for the rest of the process, as it might critically affect future outcomes.

In inter-state relations step by step negotiations may help to avoid escalation and eventually a warring conflict. This approach is based on the rational assumption that countries don’t go to war over small, trivial issues\textsuperscript{26} but instead they clash over vital, non-negotiable interests or when their survival is at stake.

Once the first step is successful, it will provide a starting point from where the parties will depart towards efficient conflict management, yet, without guaranteeing that resolution is at hand.

a. It helps find what there is in the realm of possible, viable and thus directly or indirectly define feasibility and managerial utopia.

\textsuperscript{21} This is often the case in inter-service rivalry and armaments where competition over scarce resources is acute and may affect the inter-operability ratio of the Armed Forces.


\textsuperscript{23} For an analysis based on personality attributes see Brent W. Roberts & Robert Hogan (eds.), Personality Psychology in the Workplace, American Psychological Association, Washington, 2002. As suggested “personality psychology concerns the nature of human nature – it is a view of human performance from a very broad vantage point”, p. 3.

\textsuperscript{24} See Roger Fisher (1971), Basic negotiating strategy: international conflict for beginners, Allen Lane, p. 22.

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid, p. 22

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid, p. 23

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid
b. An agreement on a trivial matter may alter the stakeholders’ perceptions and eventually their choices, thus providing eufunctional input into the conflict equation.

c. It buys valuable and crucial time until the right “timing” comes for an overall agreement. This presupposes situational and cognitive prerequisites.

d. In inter-state relations and in case of war it may lead to a temporary cease-fire and thus provide valuable time for negotiation and de-escalation.

e. A potential agreement may be taken as a promise or alternatively operate as a commitment. In many cases a promise gives the negotiator a tool\textsuperscript{28} to continue bargaining.

f. It limits disagreement to those issues on which the parties truly disagree, thus avoiding unnecessary friction over minor issues.

\textbf{Cons can be summarized as follows:}

1. The first failure might seriously aggravate the situation and the situational ability to produce desired win-win outcomes. In their turn post-failure side-effects might create further hurdles to conflict management and resolution.

2. It may lead to misperceptions about future agreements and the commitments they imply. In this case giving in may be conceptualized as an irreversible commitment that sets the whole step by step process out of control.

1. \textbf{Alternative courses: going straight to the kernel of the conflict}

The factors that support a direct policy vis-à-vis conflict management are related to time, ability and the risk involved. Focusing on risk is important because it will define the rationality – irrationality ratio of the effort, particularly when we deal with inter-state conflict that involves choices between war and peace.

\textbf{Pros}

1. It may save the negotiator time if the ripe moment for effective conflict management and resolution has come. The qualitative definition “ripe” refers to the time dimension, conditions, environment changes and attitudes of the people involved. This goes beyond the conventional wisdom paying primarily attention to the “proposals” parameter. Ripeness also refers to the ability of diplomats to successfully advance understanding. The last is particularly important in inter-state conflict where leaderships make decisions based on facts, perceptions and individual cognitive elements.

2. In case of war it may terminate it directly

\textbf{Cons}

1. When the process is in deadlock there is often no way out and this seriously undermines future efforts and may dramatically limit prospects for the adoption of win-win approaches.

2. It does not allow negotiators to use handy and useful “salami tactics”. That is to break up the big issue into smaller ones and press for these separately\textsuperscript{29} in order to gradually produce agreements on minor issues.

\textbf{Negotiating a small agreement: a multi-layer approach}

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{29} See R. Fisher, op., cit.
The pros of such an approach centre around a twin cognitive and managerial axis. Nominally they may be described as follows.

a. A mediator is trying to formulate a decision accepted by all parties outside a zero-sum framework. This decision does not pre-exist. It can’t be found on its own but should rather be formulated, constructed\(^{30}\) by introducing new input into the conflict equation. A negotiation process is not static but evolves in different stages and intensity in a way that nominally affects stances, expectations and views related, among other things, to the time dimension.

b. Step by step approaches are often more easily manageable. Similarly it is easier to get the parties agree on a minor issue. An agreement on a minor issue might provide common ground for further negotiations at a more substantive level.

c. If negotiators get the parties to agree on an issue, most commonly a minor issue or of minor importance, it means negotiators have managed to establish communication channels between the parties.

d. If negotiators can’t get parties to agree at least on something, then there is a very serious problem in bridging or at least narrowing the gap between them.

e. In this way negotiators may expose the parties’ stereotypes and prejudices and provide a new framework of understanding.

f. It may allow negotiators to seize the opportunity and take advantage of the right timing, to get leadershps are ready to re-formulate attitudes.

g. In inter-state conflict of warring nature it may lead to an immediate ceasefire.

h. Negotiators are ready take advantage of a promise even though they run the risk of investing in promises to be broken.

**Cons**

1) In inter-state conflict in particular, parties are usually prejudiced against one another and don’t trust each other. This particularly affects the psychological milieu\(^{31}\) in which decision-makers operate. The first time negotiations fail, especially on a relatively trivial matter, it will be difficult to re-establish communication and thus move on to a higher stake issue.

**The predictability – unpredictability factor in organizational and interpersonal conflict**

A basic precondition in order to understand a conflict situation and be able to intervene constructively is to understand the catalytic at times role of values and the way they affect perceptions. A central feature of a conflictual situation is unpredictability. This very situational trait describes the difficulty in dealing with human behaviour and a value-dominated environment. The task of a negotiator is to enable the parties involved to cognitively realize that there are points of convergence. Alternatively these may have to be constructed through a process of re-alignment. In many cases the parties involved in a conflict or dispute are not aware themselves of potential outlets to conflict.

The task of the negotiator is to prevent conflict escalation, as it will affect further ability to bring conflict to the previous step. Negotiators adopt alternative conflict management strategies\(^{32}\) depending on facts, perceived facts, values and attitudes formulated within a time

\(^{30}\) Ibid

\(^{31}\) See R. Jervis (1976), Perception and Misperception in International Politics, Princeton University Press, Princeton.

dimension. Their task is demanding particularly when stakeholders in conflicts are not identified or operate in a non-evident way. In this field, empirical evidence provided by numerous findings provide an insight of what is at stake and how emotional given affect cooperation, behavior and conflict transformation. This process will allow mediators to reduce conflict by means of a number of negotiation stages through, inter alia, bargaining.

In organization conflict where personal values seem to play a more decisive role the steps taken should ensure narrowing the gap between those involved. Inter-personal relations are complex and may be formulated outside a commonly accepted framework of rational behaviour. By contrast, in state conflicts it is assumed that actors behave in a rational way. In these organizational conflict cases mediators focus on re-shaping approaches and at the same time decode personal behaviour and motives. In ideal conditions final decisions should be justified and might provide a compass for future conflicts of the same nature.

A suggested typology of managing conflict through a step by step approach sets it within five steps: anticipate, prevent, identify, manage, resolve. The suggested categorization overtly or covertly refers to human behaviour and urges for a rapid solution, since psychological factors, value dichotomies and individualism may multiply negative input into a conflict situation and seriously affect management activities.

A situational case study where conflict may be even more difficult to deal with is when those involved come from a different culture. The cultural factor is a qualitative determinant of a negotiator’s ability to successfully mediate and produce results satisfactory to the sides involved.

There is a pressing need to distinguish between everyday multi-situational conflict and those cases where the stakes are high not only to the sides directly involved but also to third parties. For instance in many business/corporate situations defining incompatibilities as conflicts may be an over-exaggeration. In reality or what I call situational reality it is not a question of conflict but of plain misunderstandings. Yet, these affect the organizational efficacy and integrating capacity of a business environment.

A misunderstanding may be built upon a non-realistic incompatibility and a misperception or distorted framework. In the case of more complex cultural conflict it is suggested that “misunderstandings, and from this counterproductive, pseudo conflicts, arise when members of one culture are unable to understand culturally determined differences in communication practices, traditions, and thought processing”. Cultural differences stem from cultural incompatibilities existent in a globalised and at the same time parcelized world of heterogeneity.

For the use of third parties see S. L. Carpenter; W. J. D. Kennedy, ibid.

It is important to define the difference between conflict management and conflict resolution. Managing a conflict does not mean resolving it.

For the history of evolution of conflict studies see, inter alia, Schellenberg A. James, Conflict Resolution: theory, research, and practice, State University of New York Press, New York, 1996.


See Maccoby, M., & Scudder, T., Leading in the heat of conflict. T+D, December 2011, p. 50

A prevention of conflict strategy has the advantage of escaping the time pressure factor, while at times of conflict time limit is a factor that increases the risk of failure.


In certain cases the literature operates as a practical manual for future use. See indicatively Eric Rhenman, Lennart Strömberg, Gunnar Westerlund, Conflict and Co-operation in Business Organizations, op. cit.

**Epilogue: conflict as a transition process**

Conflict refers to the efforts of numerous factors (states, individuals, gender etc.) to bring about desired changes and impose their will on their environment. In effect in a conflict we have a clash of wills. Changes are deemed essential to those involved and they may stem from divergent values, needs, perceived or misperceived interests, stereotypes or in the cases of states their wish to dominate.

Defining conflict as a transition process implies taking into account multifaceted, multi-layer efforts to introduce new parameters in the action – reaction framework of interplay among individuals or states. The task of a negotiator or mediator is to handle this input in a way that re-establishes workable for the sides involved conditions, bring about inter-personal balance, secure corporate efficiency and formulate positive-sum games particularly in the case of state conflict.

In the case of inter-state conflict friction is often associated with changes in power configuration, survival and advancement of national interests. All these directly or indirectly refer to a transition process or an attempt to push forward changes that serve better one side’s interests. In effect, this effort to bring about changes alters the ontology of an assumed established order and is also related to the ability of mediator.

Mediation, at least on an international level, may be defined by dimensions related to time, space, cognitive bias, situational given, as well as the ability of the mediator to successfully intervene. By default success is related to effectiveness, yet, as suggested in this article, it should be associated to dimensions that critically define alternative choices and outcomes.

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