

An illustration depicting a conflict or communication barrier. Two stylized figures, a man on the left and a woman on the right, stand on opposite sides of a deep, light-blue chasm. They are both shouting into white megaphones with red handles. The background is a light blue sky with a large yellow sun in the upper left and several white clouds. The ground they stand on is brown and uneven.

INTRODUCTION TO INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT RESOLUTION

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Title of the original: Uvod v Razreševanje konfliktov v medosebnih
odnosih, Marko Iršič - Ljubljana: Zavod Rakmo, 2005

Zavod RAKMO, Ljubljana, 2018 1st electronic edition

E-book available for purchasing on: <http://www.rakmo.si/books.html>

Price 2,5 €

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www.rakmo.si

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Kataložni zapis o publikaciji (CIP) pripravili v Narodni in univerzitetni
knjižnici v Ljubljani

COBISS.SI-ID=294177024

ISBN 978-961-94310-8-5 (epub)

ISBN 978-961-94310-9-2 (pdf)

ISBN 978-961-94400-0-1 (mobi)

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INTRODUCTION

This booklet has been issued within the project **Raising Awareness of the Importance of Conflict Management**, and in line with that its aim is to promote awareness about interpersonal conflict and importance of constructively managing it.

It contains some guidelines for conflict resolution, thus representing a small contribution to the more successful and more constructive resolution of conflicts, which is crucial to the quality of interpersonal relationships.

The key element of successful conflict resolution, however, is being aware of conflict and accepting it as a normal part of human relationships, and therefore being more able to find constructive ways of dealing with it.

ABOUT CONFLICT

Conflict is not ...

Many people think of conflict as a quarrel or even physical violence. In respect to larger groups of people or nations the word conflict is used for battles and wars. But quarrels, physical violence or war are only (usually destructive) responses to conflict.

Conflict is ...

Conflict in broader terms means every confrontation of non-adjusted elements. That is a confrontation of discrepancy or disharmony. It is the state of any system that is not functioning optimally due to disharmony.

At the same time it is a state that demands a response and calls for change. **Conflict can represent a threat, and at the same time an opportunity for development in individuals, relationships and the community.**

However, it is the participants who use it for progress or destruction.

Responses to conflict

Since conflict by itself triggers tension and pain, through which it enforces activity, it is inevitable that one responds to it one way or another.

However, there are different possibilities of responding to it:

- One can **suppress conflict**, deny its existence and avoid the area where it exists;
- One can **exert pressure** upon the other or others (by demands, extortion, accusations, etc.) to make them conform to him or to solve the problem;
- One can **give in** to the pressure or pretend it is nonexistent and really or only seemingly conform to the other;
- One can try to **find a compromise**, that is relatively quickly achieved;
- One can start to **resolve the conflict**. Resolution usually demands more time and effort, but can lead to more rewarding solutions.

Withdrawal

People tend to withdraw from a conflict situation when they do not believe in the possibility of solving the problem and perceive conflict itself as dangerous.

Subordination

People tend to subordinate out of conscious or subconscious fear of the pressure that would erupt if they did not conform but expressed the issue instead.

Exerting pressure

People exert pressure on others when they believe that their way is the only correct way or their interests are the most important. They usually treat others as a means of reaching their goals, or if the other does not comply they perceive them as a source of difficulties.

Compromise

People accept compromise when they think they can gain at least something from the situation and would risk losing out otherwise.

Resolution of conflict

Trying to resolve conflict means searching for the best possible solution for both parties in terms of both reaching their goals and preserving a good relationship.

Trying to resolve conflicts - why?

Resolved conflicts bring a variety of positive consequences as they contribute to awareness of certain problems and finding better solutions.

Conflicts stimulate change, break monotony and mobilize energy, they offer opportunity to get to know oneself better as well as the other and to deepen and enrich the relationship.

In addition, resolved conflicts contribute to expanded knowledge and deepening of understanding of life and the world, facilitate closer cooperation, bring a higher level of culture to a relationship and make it possible to trust others more, as well as oneself.

Resolution often requires more effort and energy, as well as a lot of creativity to come up with new solutions. However, when we unite our efforts to search for solutions we can find some that alone (or without conflict) we would never even think of.

When conflicts are not being resolved ...

Conflicts that are not successfully resolved, because we avoid them or because of inefficient ways of dealing with them, are often repeated and become a source of frustration and hostility.

If we do not resolve conflicts, we can become their prisoners.

If we do not resolve conflicts we risk having a bad atmosphere, decreasing communication and deterioration of the relationship and, consequently, its termination or increased level of violence, either active or passive or both.

We furthermore risk becoming prisoners of unresolved conflicts, since as long as they are not resolved the relationship cannot improve in that relevant area.

In an even worse case unresolved conflicts can contribute to psychological or psychosomatic disorders. The smallest consequence of conflicts that should have been resolved and were not is disturbance of optimal functioning of individuals as well as of the relationship or the group as a whole.

How to respond to conflicts?

In spite of resolution being generally the best option it is not always in place. For example in case of time pressure, we can choose compromise or we can prevail or even conform, depending on how important the particular issue is.

If we sometimes give in to make it easier for the other, in other occasions he might be more willing to conform when we are under time pressure or a certain issue is very important to us.

Using any of the responses too often, can lead to undesirable side-effects. Someone that usually conforms might feel that they are not being listened to or considered, and may feel helpless and taken advantage of.

Someone that always seeks compromise has to negotiate their rights every time and always at least partially give them up. Someone who always tries to prevail contributes to increasing tensions and deteriorations in relationships and becomes unpopular or even hated. And someone who always tries to search for a resolution can provoke resistance and can unnecessarily waste time and effort since not every issue is important.

It is therefore a good idea to preserve balance among sensitivity for oneself (importance of own interests) and sensitivity for others (importance of good relationships).

But we should not give in or make compromise with issues that are of crucial importance to us. If we did, we would be unsatisfied and our basic needs unfulfilled.

It is important not to give in on issues that are of crucial importance to us.

However, that does not mean that we should assert our own interests at the expense of others.

Even if at first sight we do not see any another solution apart from one side giving in, it is possible that in the process of both asserting their own interests and taking into account the interests of others, that people can together discover a way for both sides to be satisfied regarding what is important to them.

Acknowledging conflicts and being able to manage them

Conflict often leads to violence and it seems as if that is always the case. Therefore we fear conflicts and try to avoid them. But that is to get things the wrong way round: lack of acknowledgement of conflicts and lack of appropriate forms of dealing with them and their resolution is what causes the danger.

The sooner we are able to recognize conflict the easier we can resolve it.

In order to be able to respond to conflict in more constructive ways, it is necessary that we learn to recognise them early. That way we can have more time to choose appropriate responses and more time to search for a solution.

The sooner we notice a conflict or if we actually foresee it the easier it is to resolve or manage. If we only recognize it after we are in the middle of a violent quarrel or a fight, the chances of successful conflict management are considerably lower.

In addition to learning to notice conflicts as early as possible, we have to learn to handle them. First, we can learn to resolve or manage minor conflicts in relationships where both sides want good cooperation or good relationship, and in time we can learn how to apply constructive conflict management to such an extent that even larger conflict or conflicts in worse relationships no longer represent difficulties.

In order to start developing the ability and skill of conflict management we need to believe it is possible to resolve conflicts. If we do not believe that, we will not put enough effort into searching for solutions or developing skills. It is also important that we are aware of the need to improve our conflict resolution skills. If we continue to respond to conflict the same way, the outcome will also remain the same.

Guidelines for successful conflict resolution

This part briefly introduces a few guidelines for successful conflict resolution. They are: alliance, taking differences into account, taking responsibility, maintaining communication and calming down, stabilizing interaction, reporting instead of controlling, dividing conflict to smaller parts, recognizing dysfunctional patterns.

Alliance

One of the most important guidelines for successful conflict resolution is alliance. Alliance means that in spite of a conflict we preserve concern for well-being of the other and we try to defeat the conflict and not each other.

Alliance means that we fight together for the relationship and not against each other.

Even if the quarrel arises we can talk about it later and together search for a way to deal with the conflict next time in a more constructive way.

We can also agree upon certain rules to which we adhere during the quarrel, therefore, alliance is active even during the quarrel. In this way we can limit quarrels and protect each other from being strongly hurt during the quarrel.

If we manage to stick to the rules agreed upon when we were not fighting, we preserve alliance, which means that we fight together for the relationship and not against each other.

Alliance means maintaining good relationship and benevolence in spite of conflict

Alliance means maintaining a good relationship and mutual benevolence in spite of misunderstandings and not seeing the other as our enemy and ourselves as their victim. Alongside protecting our own interests and values we must take into account and respect the interests and values of the other.

Taking differences into account

The unwanted outcomes of conflicts are often partly due to a presupposition of harmony, which is all but to be taken for granted. Every individual is unique and even if we are similar in many aspects, we also differ in many ways. In addition to the more obvious differences (e.g. interests, habits, behaviour, etc.) there are many more that are less obvious, like differences in our understanding of a word or phrase, differences in the approach to problem solving, differences in perception of a situation and view of world, etc.

If we do not take these differences into account or if we do not allow for the possibility that differences we are not aware of do exist, we make it harder to resolve conflict, especially if the conflict is connected to those very differences we disregard.

The anguish that we experience when a conflict occurs is often the consequence of a lack of awareness of differences, and not infrequently leads to mutual attribution of madness or malice to the other.

Taking responsibility

In a quarrel both sides tend to blame each other. We do our best, but 'the other, obviously is not ready to act constructively', we think. The only problem with this attitude is the fact, that the other thinks the same way about us.

Consequently we try to prove to the other their guilt, a pattern of behaviour that only serves to deepen the conflict. Instead we could ask: *Which of my emotional and behavioural patterns are responsible for my way of response to the conflict? How does my behaviour and the behaviour of the other combine in conflict interaction? What could I do differently next time in a similar situation? What can I learn from this conflict about myself and about the other?*

In addition to taking responsibility for our own behaviour, we can use conflict to develop and to better understand ourselves and the other, as well as deepening the relationship between us.

Taking responsibility means discovering a problem and searching for a solution instead of blaming each other.

We also have to take responsibility for the general state of a relationship and fulfilment of our needs and desires. We often wish or hope that another person would somehow know what we want and what we need and will consequently, take care of us and then we are disappointed when this does not happen.

The erroneous conclusion that pops into our heads is that the other knows very well what we need, but either deliberately withholds such action or does not care for us enough.

If in a relationship we are not getting what we need or want from the other, then it is a good idea to first make sure that the other is aware of this.

Preserving communication and calming down

A common outcome of a conflict is broken communication that can last for several days or even years. In the meantime both sides are convinced that they are right and that an injustice is being done to them.

In addition, they are angry at the other thinking: "*How can they behave this way to me?*" If we break communication, we make it possible to see ourselves as victims and the other as the offender, which prevents us from searching for solutions.

Successful conflict resolution demands that we do not break the communication, and if it is possible to persist in trying to communicate. If we cannot manage that, we can 'take a break', that is, we break the communication only for as long as we need to calm down again. Your body needs approximately 20 minutes to calm down if you can let go of the distress and refrain from continuing the negative thinking.

It is important that we come back to the topics that surfaced during the quarrel. If we break communication without coming back to it, we prevent ourselves from finding a solution and thereby prevent the deepening of the relationship. That just means that we pay the price, without getting what we paid for.

If we break communication, we block the way to a solution and stop a conflict from contributing to the relationship.

On the other hand, however, it is also important that we are able to postpone communication with the purpose of calming down. If we insist on continuing discussion in spite of the build up in internal and external tension, we risk violence, which not only breaks communication by itself, but also severely damages the relationship and leaves deep psychological and even physiological consequences.

If we do not postpone discussion in spite of the build up in tension, we risk violence.

Stabilization of interaction

One of the important guidelines is also stabilization of interaction. Conflict interaction can otherwise have a tendency to get out of hand.

If we want to preserve a constructive mode of interaction in spite of conflict, we sometimes have to respond in exact opposite of what would happen by itself.

Sometimes it means that instead of a fast and automatic response we choose slower response that enables us to get a better insight into what is happening.

Stabilization means slowing down responses and verifying perceptions.

One element of stabilization is, therefore, slowing down our responses. The other is verifying perceptions. Our responses are based on our perceptions about what is going on, which are not always (completely) correct and especially in the storm of words and emotions it often comes to distortions of perception and interpretation of what is going on.

On the one hand, we have to verify if we have understood correctly and, on the other, if the other really meant what they said.

We are often hurt or angry because our perception is incorrect or we attribute a meaning to a situation that it does not have. That happens in spite of the fact that the other may have had a completely different view of the same situation or completely different intention.

Part of the problem is the fact that we are not always aware of our own interpretations, but respond to the situation as if they were real.

Verifying perceptions means making sure that we understood the other and if the other really meant what they said.

On the other hand the other may say something that they do not really mean or regrets what they said. If in such a case we only respond to what has been said, then the conflict unnecessarily expands.

However, one can verify if the other really meant what they said or give them a chance to adopt a position on what they said which does not have to be affirmative.

If it turns out that the other did not really mean what they said and takes it back, we can avoid unnecessary hurt and escalation of a conflict; on the other hand if it turns out that the other did mean what they said, we can become aware of a deeper conflict that has to be dealt with in another way.

Report instead of control

Every message includes an expressive and the controlling segment, that is, what we are expressing to others about us, and what we want to achieve or change with others.

When tension arises, it is much easier to talk about the other and try to impose change on them or to break the communication than it is to talk about ourselves, and talk about what is happening to us.

In spite of the fact that it is hard, it is often useful to do so since this is something the other person does not know and therefore cannot take it into account.

The tension of conflict often brings a kind of blindness or numbness to the other. Despite the fact that it is more than obvious that the other is hurting, we simply do not realize it, because we are so focused on our own pain.

At the same time the other does not realize our pain either. If at such a point, we start to communicate our own feelings, instead of demanding change of behaviour or attitude from the other, we can help the other to 'open his/her eyes'.

In the storm of conflict we will most likely not be able to find a solution that would be good for both sides anyway – that probably has to take place later, when the conflict calms down – but we might, if we are able to explain our pain, understand each other a bit better than before.

Dividing conflict to smaller parts

What people generally understand by the term conflict is the consequence of a chain of smaller conflicts that at the same time impact a relationship. It is useful to recognize the smaller conflicts and differences that surface during a quarrel, and then deal with them one at the time.

It is important therefore that we do not let the quarrel expand to all aspects of a relationship but focus on particular problems that surfaced. If we try to solve all problems at once, we will probably fail to solve anything; we will however be dissatisfied and convinced that we cannot solve anything.

If, on the other hand, we solve at least a small problem because of a quarrel, there will be one less problem in the future, and we will strengthen the sense that over time we can solve a great deal of issues.

Recognizing dysfunctional patterns

What is far more importance than the individual differences that build up when a conflict arises is that we recognize the dysfunctional patterns of interaction that each participant contributes.

We all respond to the behaviour of others more or less automatically, yet remain convinced that the other person is the cause of our response.

In spite of such impression it is nevertheless true that everyone is responsible for their own behaviour and responses, especially when both sides forget that their behaviour or responses often combine into destructive interaction.

This is a key aspect of interaction that all too often we ignore. It is very important that we gradually recognize these patterns until they become transparent and we are even able to discuss them with the other. It is only when we become aware of them that we can start to change them.

Changing behavioural patterns

If we want to change the outcome of conflicts that occur, we need to change our responses to them first. This change is by no means easy, because to a significant degree our responses are automatic, especially in stressful situations.

Conflict is in most cases a stressful situation and when under stress we automatically respond with an established pattern of behaviour. The more stressful the situation the more likely our responses are automatic and the harder it is to change them.

This is the reason that during conflicts we behave in ways we otherwise would not, and that we regret afterwards. But still we act the same way the next time a similar situation arises.

With time we get the false impression that we cannot change or that it is just the way we are and consequently that conflicts cannot be solved. However, this is not the case. We can change our patterns of behaviour and we can learn to manage and resolve conflicts better.

When we discover a desired response, we have to practice it to until it becomes more or less automatic.

One possibility is that we systematically observe our responses in a stressful or conflict situation. When we discover an unwanted pattern, we can try to find out how we want to respond instead. If we do not manage to find a better response, it is useless to expect that we will respond differently next time.

However, even when we do discover a desired response, we have to practice it until it becomes more or less automatic. In the stress of a conflict we are not going to be able to think about how we might behave differently, but will automatically respond this way or the other.

Education on conflict management

If we are not able to resolve our own conflicts, it is futile to expect that our children or students will be able to. This makes it a prime responsibility for parents and educators to develop their own conflict management skills in order to be able to help children develop theirs.

Children mainly learn and adopt their basic patterns of behaviour in relationships and especially in conflict situations in the family. They use the patterns they learn at home to respond to conflict in their own marriage and other relationships.

All too often the only advice children get from adults is: "Children, stop fighting!"

All too often, however, more or less the only advice children get from their parents and other adults is: "*Children, stop fighting!*" Often behind the conflicts that children have, there are problems that they are not (yet) able to resolve more constructively.

So instead of just trying to get them to calm down – and strengthening the conviction that one cannot resolve anything – we would do better to take time to help them constructively resolve their conflict and thereby helping them to develop their conflict management skills and the awareness and belief that conflict management is possible.

If adults help children to resolve their conflicts constructively, they help them develop their conflict management skills.

Publisher

Zavod RAKMO (The RAKMO Institute) was founded in 2003 with main aim to raise awareness and promote a culture of constructive interpersonal relationships and conflict management. It is at present the leading organization in the field of transformative mediation in Slovenia.

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CONSTRUCTIVE!**

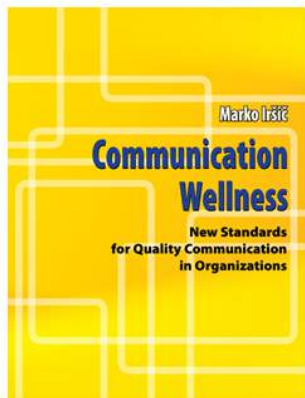
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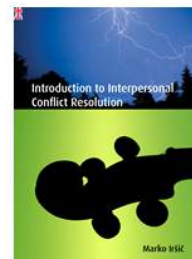
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