

Tools for Productively Managing Conflict

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Abstract: In scientific teams as in life, conflicts arise. This paper aims to provide an introduction to tools and skills to help in managing conflicts in practice. Using a structured approach enables the concerns and interests of all involved to be identified and clarified. It also permits a better understanding of yourself and others and will help empower those in conflict to find acceptable and workable resolutions.

Key Words: conflict management, tools, team science

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This paper presents some fundamentals for conflict management in practice by focusing on how to assess and manage 2-party and multi-party conflicts. Whereas strong communication skills are very important, using a systematic approach is crucial to successful conflict management and provides a robust strategy for increasing the effectiveness of conflict conversations.

A research laboratory is a dynamic environment that is undergoing continual change. There is a diversity of backgrounds and opinions among the participants that can add both richness as well as challenges. In research, there are often high stakes and significant pressures, particularly at times of diminishing resources. Together with increasing levels of internal and external regulation and evermore evident power dynamics, this mix can be a recipe for conflict.

So what can one do? How can we manage or resolve conflict? Our purpose in this paper was to provide an approach for productively managing conflict.¹ As with many other effective interventions, the first step is to recognize and diagnose the problem. There are different types of conflict, which may require different kinds of intervention and management skills.

Table 1 describes a spectrum of responses to conflict. The control of process and decision making by the parties changes with each type of response. In responding to conflict, many of us may initially want to take the watchful waiting approach and thereby avoid conflict as we try to size up the situation. Yet, in most cases, some intervention is needed. At the initial (primary) level, the parties talk directly. At the next level, another party may be needed to help facilitate the discussion. This helper may be another colleague or peer, internal to the collaboration or sometimes external. Beyond these levels, the process and decision making moves out of the parties' hands to a higher authority. In this article, we will focus on what *you* can do as one of the involved parties or, potentially, as a mediator for your collea-

gues, should they find themselves in conflict and ask for your help.

To begin this discussion, it is important to distinguish cognitive conflict from affective conflict. Cognitive conflict² is a term used to describe disagreements that are issue focused, not personal, and are characteristic of high performing groups. These disagreements are substantive in nature; they are about ideas and approaches. Cognitive conflicts are what we often seek in brainstorming, when we encourage open problem-focused discussions to test ideas and assumptions, consider and reconcile differences, and undertake true collective decision making. Affective conflict, in contrast, is what many of us prefer to avoid. These are conflicts with personal antagonism, often fueled by differences in values and beliefs. Effective conflict shifts the focus from the ideas to the person and, in doing so, can be destructive to group performance and cohesion. In personalizing the issues, affective conflict undermines discussion. It can foster defensiveness and be a barrier that limits participation in the decision-making processes. Managing affective conflict can be challenging. So to improve the chances of successfully managing conflict, it is helpful to approach it cognitively, both in substance and in process.³

AN APPROACH TO PROBLEM SOLVING

Figure 1 outlines one problem-solving approach you might use to do this.

Step 1: Make the Approach: Reflect—Invite—Set the Stage

Before Starting, Reflect

There is one chance to make a first impression, and the content and tone of the message (what is sent out) can affect the other party's response (what is received and returned). When initiating this conflict management strategy, not only are you raising the issue(s), you also are inviting the other(s) to participate and feel safe in discussing the matter(s) with you. Therefore, in setting the stage, it is critical to be clear about the intentions of the interaction and, in particular, to highlight the goal of reaching a positive resolution and engaging the other(s) as active participant(s) in this process. Consider, for example, the potential collaboration between 2 faculty members (Drs Ally and Chase; see discussion case in this issue, page 767). Dr. Chase is a senior clinical researcher, and he is hesitant about collaborating with Dr. Ally, in part owing to Dr. Ally's limited clinical research experience. Dr. Chase knows that trials involving human subjects can be complex and difficult. That said, he also recognizes great potential in the proposed joint project. If Dr. Chase decides to explore a possible collaboration with Dr. Ally, he will need to resolve his human subjects' research concerns. One option might be for Dr. Chase to initiate this discussion with Dr. Ally with a show of his enthusiasm for the project and for their potential collaborative effort. With that, he could then also inquire about the level of clinical research expertise that Dr. Ally believes will be needed and available to them in assuring their desired high-quality research and human subjects' protections. By using this approach, Dr. Chase opens

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TABLE 1. Spectrum of Conflict Management Approaches

| Response to Conflict | Process Type | Process Control | Decision-Making Control | Intervention Level |
|-------------------------------|--------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------|
| Ignore it | Inaction | None | None | Watchful waiting |
| Talk about it | Negotiation | Parties | Parties | Primary |
| Mediate it | Mediation | Mediator | Parties | Tertiary |
| Take it to a higher authority | Arbitration | Arbitrator | Arbitrator | Quaternary |
| | Adjudication | Hearing officer or judge | Judge or jury | Quaternary |

the door for a collaborative discussion on the topic in a way that enables both he and Dr. Ally to contribute.

Step 2. Share Perspectives: Similarities and Differences

Once you initiate this “conversation,” it is time to share perspectives. You ask for the other person’s views, and it is often helpful if you then respond by briefly paraphrasing what you hear. This emphasizes that you are listening carefully to what is being said and can help to ensure that all parties have the same understanding. Perspectives may differ, and therefore, it is important that you acknowledge your own contributions to the current situation (both positive and negative). Be clear about your perspectives—both similar and different from those expressed to you. Returning to the example in step 1, Dr. Chase would invite Dr. Ally to a conversation and ask her to share her perspective first as he listens. While listening, he should not be planning what he will say in response; instead, he should listen in a way that enables Dr. Ally to feel that his genuine interest in her ideas and opinions. One way to demonstrate that he has heard her is by then rephrasing what she has said and asking if he is understanding her correctly.

Step 3: Build Understanding: Intent, Impact, and the True Issues at Hand

Working from a base of agreement is often helpful because it puts parties on the same page and emphasizes their commonalities and alignments. From here, the parties can then work together to explore where and why their views differ. In doing this, it may help to think about the many factors that influence one’s beliefs and actions, as depicted in Figure 2 (based on the “ladder of inference” of Argyris et al.⁴ and Argyris and Schon⁵).

The filters, knowledge, and approaches we each use in progressing up this “ladder of inference” may differ. Thus, the same observable data might result in differences at subsequent

levels and ultimately in the actions that we each choose to take. Whereas actions are observed in the public sphere, what came before them (intent) and what comes after (impact) remain opaque within each person’s private spheres. So you may know your own intent when acting, but you may not know the intent in others’ actions; and while you may be aware of the impact of others’ actions on you, you may be unaware of how your actions affect others.

Therefore, separating intent from impact and clarifying the true issues at hand are important next steps for building understanding. Identifying *all* the parties’ issues is key⁶; and because issues may differ for each party, their initial descriptions need to be clear, using concise neutral language that avoids pronouns and judgments. These identified issues will form the conflict management agenda. By following this agenda, each issue is then separately discussed to be sure that assumptions are clear and that the interests and feelings of all parties regarding each issue are explored. With what is now hopefully a clearer picture for all of the issues and perspectives, what next? Here sensitivity and creativity intersect, as the involved parties agree on ground rules, summarize interests, and brainstorm to identify options. Now recognizing the risks and benefits for each party, and the constraints and desires, how does one then succeed in moving toward agreement?

Step 4: Agree on Solutions: Doable and Durable

Successfully building understanding may help each party to put themselves into the other party’s shoes and to reach a

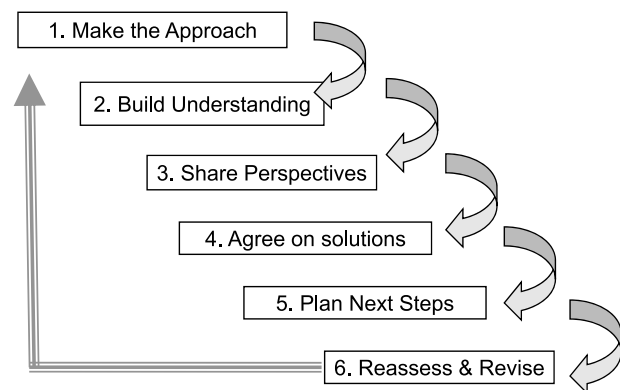


FIGURE 1. A problem-solving approach to conflict management.

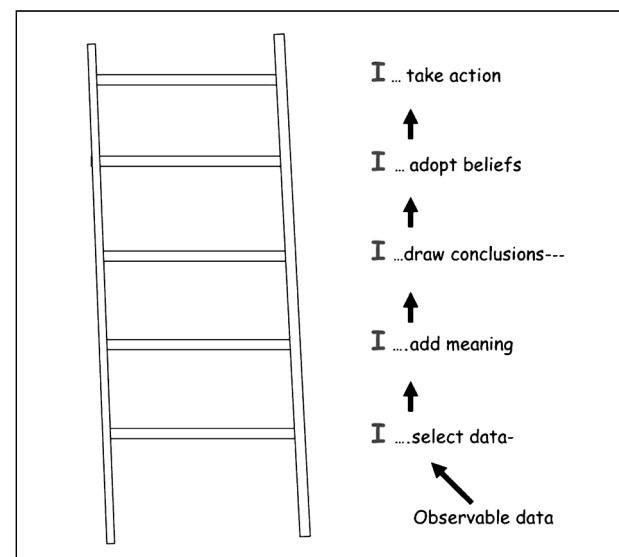


FIGURE 2. From observation to action: the ladder of inference* (from the bottom up). *Based on the “Ladder of Inference” of Argyris et al.⁴ and Argyris and Schon.⁵

negotiated agreement that is both doable and durable for all. There is give-and-take in crafting solutions, and a successful resolution often depends on finding an option that can maximize the interests of all parties. Continuing with our example, if Drs Chase and Ally come to an agreement that Dr. Ally needs additional training and mentoring in the conduct of clinical trials, they could probably uphold that and develop a strategy for her to obtain it. But if, instead, their agreement is that because of this gap they will work separately and each focus on their own aspects of the project—while initially doable—is that solution durable? Not likely! In reaching resolution, you need both doability and durability. The agreement needs to meet the interests of all the parties because that is where the durability comes from—from satisfying what people care most about.

Step 5: Plan Next Steps: Plans for Implementation

Often with managing conflict, we are so happy to see some improvement in reaching a resolution that we just want to get it over with. To make it happen though, you have to think about its implementation. Once we are clear about what our (better) communication/collaboration looks like (our agreed-upon solution), we also need to agree on the detailed steps to create it. For example, for increased communication, do we now need to have more laboratory meetings? Are we going to send more e-mails? Is there something about our research documentation that is going to be different? What in fact is going to change in the current status quo? And who needs to do what to make that happen and by when? Part of the resolution is to set out the explicit plans and timelines, much the way you would craft the protocol for conducting research from a research grant proposal. Jointly outlining and reaching agreement on what needs to happen, who needs to do what (and by when), and any other implementation specifics also helps to ensure that common intents are appropriately put into actions for attaining the desired impacts.

Step 6: Reassess and Revise: Communication . . . Communication . . . Communication

We mentioned at the start that laboratories, other types of research groups, and essentially all our relationships, are dynamic. So we now return full circle, to reassess our collaborations, and communicate about what is working and what is not. Drawn into the excitement and challenges of our team's science, we may tend not to focus on the processes for reassessing and revising. Yet, as in many other areas, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Using this same problem-solving approach, you can early and often address minor concerns before they become conflicts!

The more familiar and practiced you become with these conflict management steps, the more skillful and comfortable you will be putting them into practice. Many helpful resources are available, such as the Collaboration and Team Science Field Guide⁷ and the Team Science Toolkit⁸ from the National Institutes of Health. And several additional suggested readings are listed below. Importantly, recognize that we all face conflicts, so that seeking input and assistance from colleagues and collaborators can be a help to you and to them as well.

We have presented a practical approach for managing conflicts through improved communication and structured problem solving that involves initiating, sharing, informing, agreeing, implementing, and reassessing. This approach can be used to

align researchers' differing perspectives, interests, and expectations and to help prevent and manage conflicts so that the diversity among research collaborators can foster new ideas and innovations for beneficial progress.

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