

Navigating the Phases of Organizational Conflict

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Knowing how to respond to organizational conflict as a manager is an overlooked and underdeveloped skill. Given the pervasiveness of conflict in workplaces, though, it's hardly optional.

The phases of organizational conflict offer an important perspective. For instance, if you're able to notice the signs of an escalating, negative conflict, you can step in before things get out of hand. You can then intervene with a more positive approach.



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There are five phases of organizational conflict that Pondy identified for any given episode.

1. Latent Stage

The latent stage is characterized by the potential for conflict. When Pondy identified this stage, he observed three basic types of latent conflict in the current literature.

1. **Competition for Scarce Resources:** Participants' demand for resources exceeds available resources.
2. **Drives for Autonomy:** A party's desires control over an activity that another party believes is his or her own domain.
3. **Divergence of Subunit Goals:** Two parties who must work together on a joint activity can't reach a consensus on what they should do.

Something was missing: role conflict. Pondy defined that concept by someone receiving incompatible role demands or expectations from others. "This model has the drawback that it treats the focal person as merely a passive receiver than as an active participant in the relationship," he added. Role conflict can be a factor in all three types of latent conflict.

None of the participants or outside parties may recognize latent conflict conditions. It's also possible for the latent conflict to last for a long time and never get to the next stage, especially in environments where conflict is actively avoided.

2. Perceived Stage

In the perceived stage, one or more parties become aware of actual conflict. Note that there may be no conditions of latent conflict present in the perceived stage. In that case, conflict may be resolved by simply improving communications between affected parties. A caveat is that if parties' positions are in opposition, open communication can make the conflict worse.

Similar to latent conflict, the perceived stage of conflict can exist for quite some time. If parties don't feel the need to bring up minor differences, they might just adapt, for better or worse.

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3. Felt Stage

The felt stage of conflict concentrates on emotions coming into play for affected parties. In other words, two people are aware that they're having a conflict in the workplace. It contributes to feelings of tension, stress, and anxiety.

Pondy called those feelings the "personalization of conflict." Often, the result is a dysfunctional form of conflict that worries researchers and practitioners. Why does that occur? One explanation is that inconsistent demands of organizational and individual growth cause anxieties. A second explanation is that the whole personality of the affected individual becomes involved.

4. Manifest

In the manifest stage, conflict is out in the open. One way to define conflict in this stage is to say it is behavior that frustrates the goals of another participant. In other words, one person consciously blocks another person's goal achievement.

What the conflict looks like can vary quite a bit. Pondy mentioned that the most obvious form of open aggression, such as physical and verbal violence, is forbidden by organizational norms. More common are covert attempts to sabotage or impede the other person's plans. For instance, lower-level participants may engage in apathy and rigid adherence to the rules to resist mistreatment from those higher up in the organization.

Most conflict resolution efforts are concentrated on behavior that moves to the manifest stage. The behavior can move straight from the perceived stage to the manifest stage or from the felt stage to the manifest stage.

5. Aftermath

The aftermath of a conflict episode refers to its outcome, which can be positive or negative.

On the positive side, a genuine resolution can lead to satisfied parties who are better able to work with each other. It's also possible for the aftermath of an episode to cause participants to focus on latent conflicts that they haven't perceived and dealt with previously.

On the negative side, conflict may be suppressed and not resolved. That can cause latent conditions of conflict to build and explode in more serious forms. Either the matter is rectified or the relationship dissolves.

Responding to the Different Phases of Organizational Conflict

As a manager, you play an important role in dealing with conflict. Your words and actions will set the tone for how employees interact with conflict and the signs leading up to it.

Some managers don't address it at all. Instead, they model avoidance behavior that a lot of people, inside or outside of an organizational context, naturally have. The result is that conflict becomes something to suppress and ignore, which only adds to the tension. Ignoring conflict isn't realistic, though. Organizations deal with conflict on a regular basis; you can't hide from it.

One of your goals should be to address conflict head-on and model how it can be positive. People should embrace alternative opinions and challenging points of view because those approaches can help workers gain a better understanding of topics and explore new solutions. There's a big difference between seeing conflict as something negative and seeing conflict as an opportunity to grow. As long as conflict and the signs of conflict are framed appropriately, conflict can be productive.

Train your employees to have a healthier view of conflict. The result can lead to professional growth and better team relations. You can also teach them the skills they need when conflict becomes negative. That way they'll have the skills to properly [handle confrontation at work \(/resources/article/how-to-handle-confrontation-at-work/\)](/resources/article/how-to-handle-confrontation-at-work/).

You may not feel confident in your ability to develop a better view of conflict for you and your team. It's unfortunate that managers don't often receive the training they need for this topic. If that describes you, however, the right education can help you manage conflict and become a better communicator. Earn an [online MBA \(/programs/mba-masters-business-administration/\)](/programs/mba-masters-business-administration/) that emphasizes strategic leadership, business ethics, and other areas that directly impact how you lead others. You'll also receive instruction in areas like economics, finance and accounting, marketing, and more.

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