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# UNIT 10 MANAGEMENT OF ORGANISATIONAL CONFLICTS

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## Objectives

After studying this Unit, you should be able to:

- Recognise different types of conflicts
- Describe the process of a conflict
- Compare and contrast different views about conflict
- Appreciate functional and dysfunctional consequences of conflict
- Identify the sources of conflict
- Decide when and how to stimulate conflict
- Diagnose which conflict resolution strategy to use and when.

## Structure

- 10.1 Introduction
- 10.2 Types of Conflict
- 10.3 The Process of Conflict
- 10.4 Different Views About Conflict
- 10.5 The Impact of Conflict
- 10.6 Sources of Conflict
- 10.7 Modes of Conflict Management
- 10.8 Summary.
- 10.9 Self-assessment Test
- 10.10 Key Words
- 10.11 Further Readings

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## 10.1 INTRODUCTION

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Life is a never ending process of one conflict after another. Remember the time when you were a small child and had to choose between a tricycle and a cricket set or say, a set of dolls and a new frock for a birthday present. That was probably your first exposure to a conflict situation. Of course, this is a simplistic example of a conflict, but has life been the same since? Probably not. Think back and recall how each succeeding conflict in your life over the years has been increasingly complex.

Conflict is a theme that has occupied the thinking of man more than any other with the exception of God and love. Conflict has always been widespread in society but it is only recently that it has generated a lot of interest and has been the focus of research and study. We are living in the age of conflict. Everyday the choices available to us regarding any decision are increasing in number. You may have wanted to become a manager, an entrepreneur or a computer scientist. On the other hand, your father might have wanted you to become a doctor, a lawyer or a chartered accountant. Thus you faced a conflict not only at an **intrapersonal** level, in terms of the various choices confronting you, but also at an **interpersonal** level-your choice vs. your father's choice of a career for you.

Conflict is not confined at the individual level alone but is manifesting itself more and more in organisations. Employees have become more vociferous in their demands for a better deal. Various departments in an organisation face a situation full of conflicts due to a number of reasons like goal diversity, scarcity of resources or task interdependence etc.

Management today is faced with the awesome responsibility of ensuring optimum levels of growth and productivity in an environment that is full of conflicting situations. A survey suggests that the modern manager spends over 20% of his time



handling one form of conflict or the other. Top and middle level managers in the same survey have pointed out the importance of conflict management skills. We hope that the knowledge you will gain from this Unit will equip you better to manage conflict situations more deftly at your workplace.

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## 10.2 TYPES OF CONFLICT

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### **Conflict within an Individual**

You can locate conflict at various levels. There could be conflict within oneself-the intrapersonal conflict. Basically, there are three types of such conflicts. You may have an excellent job offer in a city you are not willing to go to. In such a case, you are attracted to and repelled by the same object-an approach-avoidance conflict. Similarly you may be attracted to two equally appealing alternatives like seeing a movie or going for a picnic-an approach-approach conflict. You may also be repelled by two equally unpleasant alternatives like the threat of being dismissed if you fail to report against a friendly colleague who is guilty of breaking the organisation's rules-an avoidance-avoidance conflict.

### **Conflict between Individuals**

Conflict can also take an interpersonal form. Conflict between individuals takes place owing to several factors, but most common are personal dislikes or personality differences. When there are only differences of opinion between individuals about task-related matters, it can be construed as technical conflict rather than interpersonal conflict. Of course, technical and interpersonal conflicts may influence each other due to role-related pressures. The sales manager may put the blame for low sales volume on the production manager not meeting his production schedule and may start disliking the production manager as an incompetent person. It is often very difficult to establish whether a conflict between two parties is due to manifest rational factors, or it emanates from hidden personal factors.

### **Conflict between an Individual and a Group**

These types of intragroup conflicts arise frequently due to an individual's inability to conform to the group norms. For example, most groups have an idea of a "fair day's work" and may pressurise an individual if he exceeds or falls short of the group's productivity norms. If the individual resents any such pressure or punishment, he could come into conflict with other group members. Usually, it is very difficult for an individual to remain a group-member and at the same time, substantially deviate from the group norm. So, in most cases, either he conforms to the group norm or quits (or is rejected by) the group. Of course, before taking any such extreme step, he or the other group members try to influence each other through several mechanisms leading to different episodes of conflict (much to the delight of the researchers in this field called Group Dynamics).

### **Conflict between Groups within an Organisation**

Intergroup conflicts are one of the most important types of conflict to understand, as typically, an organisation is structured in the form of several interdependent task-groups. Some of the usually chronic conflicts in most of the organisations are found at this level, e.g., Union vs. Management, one Union vs. another Union; one functional area like production vs. another functional area like maintenance; direct recruits vs. promotees, etc. The newly emerging field of Organisational Politics has started systematically investigating such types of conflict and in a later section on the effects of conflict we shall give examples of what happens to groups when their conflicts are not solved.

### **Conflict between Organisations**

Conflict between organisations is considered desirable if limited to the economic context only. The *laissez-faire* economy is based on this concept. It is assumed that conflict between organisations leads to innovative and new products, technological advancement, and better services at lower prices. However, in this Unit we shall refrain from probing into this macro-level conflict.



**Activity A**

From your own experience, give an example of approach-approach conflict where you had to choose between two equally attractive goals. Recall another example of avoidance-avoidance conflict where you had to choose between lesser of two evils: Cite yet another example of approach-avoidance conflict where you felt quite ambivalent because both positive and negative incentives were associated with the same goal.

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**Activity B**

Recall an interpersonal conflict situation where you found two persons you care about were in conflict in which anger, hostility, and strong opinions were present, Outline the triggering events and what exactly happened. What did you do? Did you become involved and take a position? Or did you attempt to mediate? Or were you observing to see what happens? Or did you leave the scene because you thought it was none of your business?

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**Activity C**

Cite an example of inter-group conflict in the organisation where you work, It can be an example of lateral conflicts, e.g., between two departments, between line and staff, between two unions, etc. Or it can be an example of vertical conflict, for example between union and management. What are the behaviours of the groups from which you infer that they are in conflict? List these behaviours.

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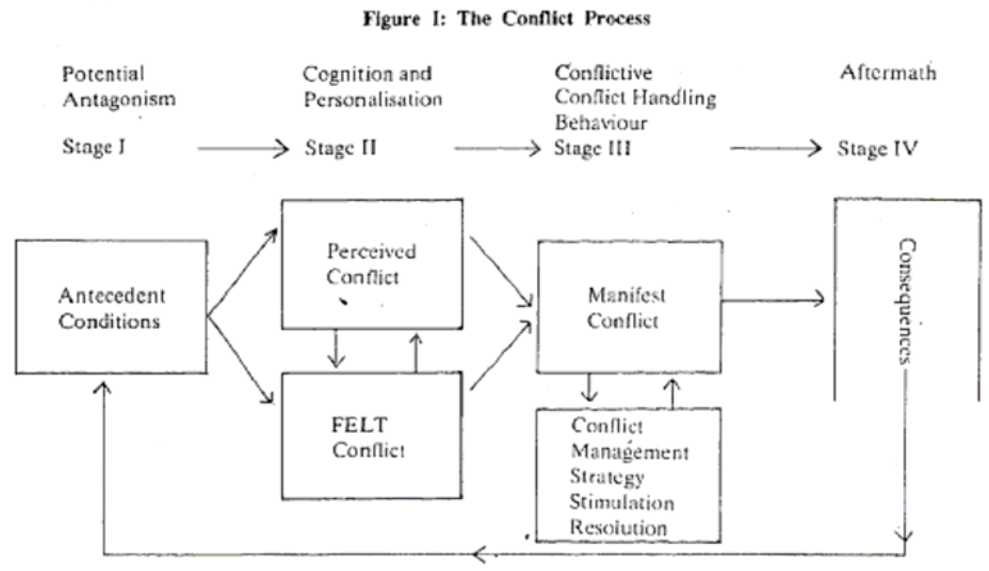
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**10.3 THE PROCESS OF CONFLICT**

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You have just observed that beginning within an individual, conflict can be found on several levels. The nature of intrapersonal conflict is of very high significance and the knowledge of mechanisms available to resolve it is immensely important in improving personal effectiveness, In this Unit; however, our focus will be on interpersonal, intragroup and intergroup conflicts as these types directly influence effectiveness of an organisation.

For a conflict to exist it must be perceived by the parties to it. If no one is aware of a conflict then it is generally agreed that no conflict exists. Still, does a mere awareness of opposing goals, or differences of option, or antagonistic feelings imply that there is a conflict? It would be easier for you, to understand conflict, if you view it as a dynamic process which includes antecedent conditions, cognitive states, affective states and conflicting behaviour. Have a look at Figure I on the conflict process and you will be able to describe and analyse conflict between two parties- individuals, groups or organisations-in a chain of episodes which tend to unfold in a particular sequence.



### Potential Antagonism

The first stage is the presence of antecedent conditions that create opportunities for conflict to arise. They need not necessarily lead to conflict and may be present in the absence-of conflict as well. You may refer to this stage as the source of conflict and in a later section we shall have a fuller discussion on these antecedent conditions which might prepare the ground for the onset of the second stage. Some of these antecedent conditions which we shall discuss refer to scarcity of resources, heterogeneity of members and diversity of goals, values, perception; degree of dependence between groups; insufficient exchange of information, etc.

### Cognition and Personalisation

The antecedent conditions may or may not lead to conflict. They must be perceived as threatening if conflict is to develop. The situation may be ignored if it is seen as minimally threatening. Moreover, if a conflict is perceived, it does not mean that it is personalised ("felt conflict"). However, if feelings are generated, they tend to influence perception of the conflict. It is at the felt level, when individuals become emotionally involved and parties experience feelings of threat, hostility, fear or mistrust.

### Conflictive and Conflict-management Behaviour

Manifest behaviour is the action resulting from perceived and/or felt conflict. At this stage, a conscious attempt is made by one party to block the goal achievement of the other party. Such behaviour may range from subtle, indirect and highly controlled forms of interference to more open forms of aggressive behaviour like strikes, riots and war. Most conflict-handling behaviours are displayed in several forms like resignation and withdrawal, appeasement and compromise, confrontation and collaboration, etc. These behaviours are often referred to as conflict management styles and stem from the strategies of conflict stimulation or conflict resolution. In a later section, we shall discuss in greater detail some of these modes of conflict management.

### Aftermath

The interplay between different forms of overt conflict behaviour and conflict handling strategies of stimulation or resolution influence the consequences. These



consequences (in terms of performance of the group, the level of satisfaction and quality of relationship in the involved parties, change of structure and policies etc.) in turn influence the antecedent conditions and probability of future conflict. Sometimes, the aftermath sows the seeds of yet another conflict episode in which case the entire process is repeated.

The four-stage conflict-process model is a very useful framework to understand the episode of any conflict. On the basis of such a framework you can now define conflict as the process which begins when A, as one party perceives that B, as the other party, is making some conscious efforts to frustrate A in pursuing his interest. Party A and/or B may be an individual and/or group(s).

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### Activity D

Think about a conflict episode in your workplace between two parties about whom you have some knowledge. What were the antecedent conditions which allowed the conflict to arise? How did the two parties respectively perceive the conflict situation? What were their respective feelings? What manifest behaviour showed that they were in conflict? How was the conflict managed? What were the consequences? Prepare an analytical report.

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## 10.4 DIFFERENT VIEWS ABOUT CONFLICT

At this stage, you might be tempted to ask quite a few questions about the role of conflict in groups and organisations. Can you avoid all conflicts or are they inevitable? Is it at all good to have any conflict? Who is primarily responsible in allowing a conflict to take place? What should be the role of a manager once it arises? These are very important questions which people tend to answer in one way or the other depending upon the views they hold about conflict. The views about conflict itself are "conflicting". In this section, we shall examine these views and their impact on management practices.

### The Traditional View

The traditional view, prevalent in the 1930s, 1940s, regarded all conflicts as harmful and evil. Conflict was viewed negatively and was associated with violence, turbulence, agitation, destruction and irrationality. It was believed that conflict indicated a malfunctioning within the organisation and that the appearance of conflict was the consequence of the management's failure to bind the employees and the organisation together and failure to communicate to them the commonality between the individual and organisation interests. Had the management corrected those lapses, according to the traditionalists, there would have been no conflict, and the organisation would have been able to function as a smooth integrated whole. In fact, Frederick Taylor, the father of "Scientific Management" was of the opinion that if the principles of scientific management were properly applied, then the age-old conflict between labour and management would disappear. The traditionalist view offers a rather simplified approach to conflict. Since all conflict is bad and is to be avoided, then we need merely isolate the factors that cause conflict and eliminate them. Research studies have provided evidence to dispute this viewpoint, yet many of us continue to believe that conflict is unnecessary and is to be always avoided.

### The Behavioural View

The, behavioural school of thought argues that conflict is the logical and inevitable outcome in any organisation and as such should be accepted. The conflict theory was dominated by the behaviouralist approach from the late 1940s through the mid-1970s.



The behaviouralists maintained that since an organisation was composed of individuals and they had different perceptions of goals and differing values, conflict was bound to arise in the organisation. Managers of various departments had separate priorities and conflicting ideas about resource allocation. Hence conflict was the unavoidable outcome. Subordinates may clash with the manager over whether the work can be accomplished in the given period of time or not. They might even argue with subordinates at their own level over the best possible way to do a given job. Thus, according to the behaviouralists, conflict was an unavoidable outcome but at the same time they believed that conflict need not always be detrimental. Under some circumstances it could focus on problems and instigate a search for better and more innovative solutions to problems. Though the behaviouralists conceded that conflict could lead to more creativity in problem solving and could be beneficial to organisation under certain conditions, yet they perceived conflict as harmful something to be resolved once it arose. Their views about human nature were that people are essentially good; trust, cooperation and goodness are given in human nature. According to the behaviouralist, the major antecedent conditions which induce aggressiveness and conflict in people are the faulty policies and structure resulting in distortion and breakdown in communication. Hence the manager's role in resolving conflict is to restore understanding, trust and openness between parties.

### The interactionist View

The thinking currently prevalent about conflict has been labelled as the interactionist view. In contrast to the behaviouralist view which merely accepts conflict as inevitable, the interactionists not only accept conflict but also encourage it. However, they maintain that conflict must be regulated so that it does not get out of control producing dysfunctional consequences. The inevitability of conflict results from the interaction between organisationally imposed struggle for limited rewards (e.g., status, responsibility or power) and innate aggressive and competitive instincts in people. Against this perspective, the interactionists maintain that if harmony, peace, tranquility and cooperativeness prevail in a situation for a long time, the group is prone to become nonresponsive to innovation and change. To shake the group out of its complacency and to make it viable, self-critical and creative, an ongoing minimum level of conflict must be maintained. Advocates of interactionist view emphasise that the mission of management is effective goal attainment, not the creation of harmony and cooperation. So, a manager's task is not to eliminate or reduce conflict but to **manage** it in such a manner so that its beneficial effects are maximised and its negative or harmful aspects are minimised. Such conflict management may even include stimulation of conflict where absence of conflict may hamper an organisation's innovation and creativity and thus prevent it from reaching an optimal level of performance.

### Activity E

Test your comprehension of the three views of conflict by checking each of the following statements as "TRUE" or "FALSE"

Statement	True	False
i) According to traditional view, all conflicts are avoidable.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
ii) Frederick Taylor believed that conflict can be good for an organisation.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
iii) Behaviouralists accepted conflict as inevitable but were not in favour of encouraging it.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
iv) According to the behaviouralists, the manager's role is to resolve conflict by restoring understanding, trust and openness between parties.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
v) Behaviouralist view is the current view of the conflict.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
vi) Interactionists maintain that all conflicts should be eliminated.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
vii) The current thinking is that the absence of conflict may indicate the group's nonresponsiveness to need for change and innovation.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**Answers:** (i) T; (ii) F; (iii) T; (iv) T; (v) F; (vi) T; (vii) T



## 10.5 THE IMPACT OF CONFLICT

From the discussions on different views on conflict, what inference do you draw? Inference could be that conflict can have both positive and negative impact on individuals, groups and organisations. For example, as a result of intergroup conflict, certain changes occur within groups and between groups. Some changes have positive effects, others have negative effects. Let us explore this issue with Edgar Schein (1980) who has compiled a list of changes on the basis of research findings.

As a result of intergroup conflict some changes that may occur **within** the groups involved are:

- 1 **Group cohesiveness increases.** The group becomes more closely knit; its members show greater loyalty.
- 2 **The group becomes task-oriented.** Group climate changes from informal to task-oriented in order to deal with the external threat.
- 3 **Leadership becomes more directive.** As the group becomes more task-oriented, the leader becomes more authoritarian.
- 4 **Organisational structure becomes more rigid.** Authority and responsibility relationships among and between members become more clearly defined.
- 5 **Group unity is stressed.** The group demands increasing loyalty and conformity from its members.

Prolonged group conflicts cause the following changes in relationship **between** groups:

- 1 **Groups become antagonistic toward each other.** Each group sees the other as an enemy who interferes with its goal-oriented behaviour.
- 2 **Perceptions are distorted.** Each group develops positive perceptions about its own group and negative perceptions toward the other.
- 3 **Communication ceases to exist.** When in conflict members of one group avoid interaction with members of the other. If they are forced to interact, they tend to show hostility and aggression towards each other.
- 4 **Groups apply a double standard.** Each group clearly sees all the vicious acts of the other party while remaining blind to the same acts performed by their own group.

From the above two lists of changes within and between groups in conflict, you can spot a number of negative effects. What about some potential benefits of intergroup conflicts? Here is such a list:

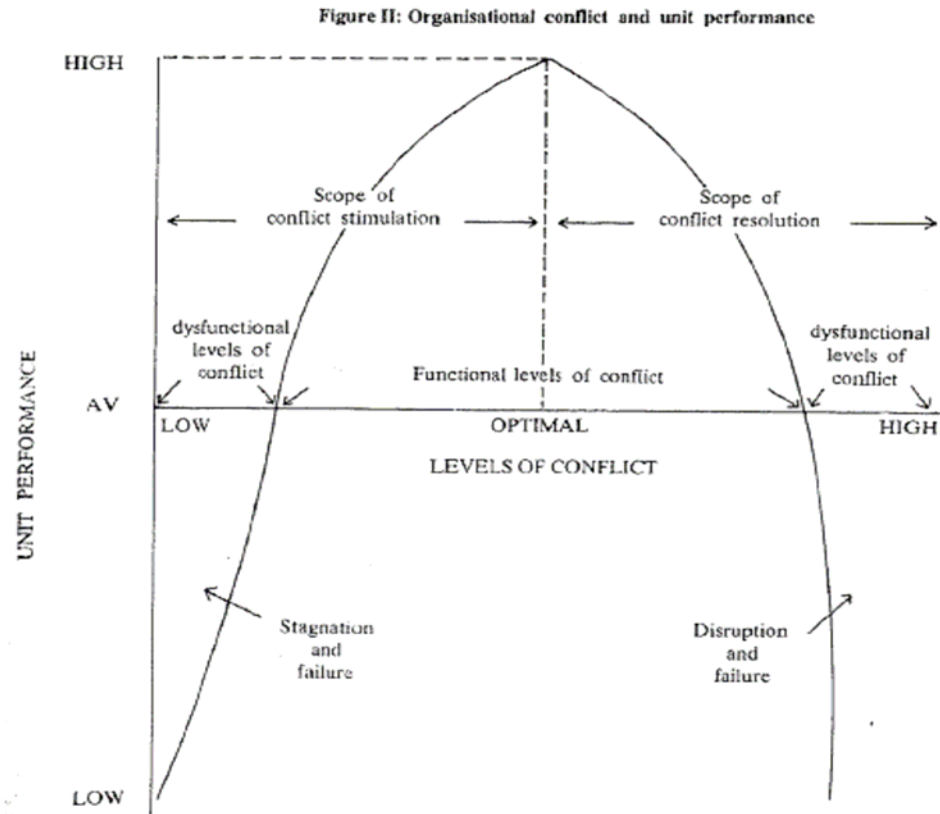
- 1 **Conflict clarifies the real issue.** When people of groups express their concerns and differences, it helps sharpen the real issue involved in a problem. Without conflict, many organisational problems go unnoticed and remain unresolved.
- 2 **Conflict increases innovation.** Conflict generates a greater diversity of ideas and viewpoints. Such a diversity can stimulate innovation in organisational practices.
- 3 **Intergroup conflict solidifies the group.** When members of a group are faced with an external enemy, they tend to work together more closely to deal with it. A manager may use this new cohesion to reduce internal conflicts.
- 4 **Conflict serves as a catharsis.** Conflict can provide an outlet through which organisational members can ventilate their feelings without damaging organisational functioning.
- 5 **Conflict resolution solidifies intergroup relationships.** Once group conflict is successfully resolved, it can solidify the relationships between groups and it may even make the groups feel closer to each other.

Looking into some of the effects of conflicts you can take a balanced view to conclude that conflict is inherently neither good nor bad but simply has the potential to improve or impair an organisation's performance through its consequences. Conflicts that result in increased organisation performance and help an organisation to attain its goals may be termed as **Functional**. On the other hand, conflict that hinders an organisation's growth and prevents it from achieving its goals can be termed as **Dysfunctional**. Thus conflict in certain forms can be functional or dysfunctional depending upon its nature, intensity, duration and the manner in which it is handled.

You may ask: How do I know whether a conflict is functional or dysfunctional? On what criteria should I base my judgment about the value of conflict?

It is true that the demarcation between functional and dysfunctional conflict is neither clear nor precise. No particular level of conflict can be adopted as acceptable or by the impact it has on group/unit performance, rather than on a single individual. criterion for you to base your judgment upon is unit performance. Since a group exists to achieve certain predetermined goals, the functionality of a conflict can be measured by the impact it has to group/unit performance, rather than on a single individual. Figure II shows the relationship between organisational conflict and group or unit performance.

**Figure II: Organisational conflict and unit performance**



The figure shows that there is an optimal, highly functional level of conflict at which the unit's performance is at the maximum. This can happen because at that level of conflict the group or the unit's internal environment is characterised by self-criticism and innovativeness. When the conflict level is too low, it is dysfunctional as the unit's performance is low due to apathy, stagnation, lack of new ideas and nonresponsiveness of the unit-members to the demands of change. In such a situation, a manager may have to resort to stimulating conflicts to make the unit more viable. On the other hand, when the conflict level is too high, it is again dysfunctional, as the survival of the group or the unit is threatened owing to diversion of energies away from performance and goal attainment activities of the members. Chaos and disruption prevails. Naturally, the most important managerial task becomes how to resolve the conflict.

**Activity F**

Recapitulate your experience of an intergroup conflict in your work situation. Refer to the changes within and between groups listed in this section. Check whether such changes took place in your experience or not. What additional changes did you notice? Referring to your group as A and the other as B, narrate the entire proceedings of the events from the eyes of an outsider in the form of a case.

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### Activity G

Hold a 20-minute discussion with your friends on the issue of functionality of conflicts. You take the position that conflict can be functional. Collect some evidences to substantiate your position. Encourage others to hold an opposite view and prove their position with the help of evidence. After this discussion is over, reflect and report whether conflict between you and your friends on the issue of functionality of conflict has been 'functional' or not in terms of clarifying the issue!

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### Activity H

Locate a workgroup where there is almost no conflict and the group is characterised by peace and tranquility. Collect some data on this group's performance and the average performance of all other similar groups but with different degrees of conflict. Plot the performance of this group against the average performance. Check whether the relationship between unit performance and absence of conflict suggested in Figure II is correct. Revise your understanding, if need be.

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## 10.6 SOURCES OF CONFLICT

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In the earlier sections, you have seen that it would be naive to think that conflicts in an organisation take place simply due to lack of understanding between people. A large number of potential sources of conflict exist in organisational life as antecedent conditions and realistic basis for some conflicts. In this section, we shall quickly review some such sources.

### Competition for Limited Resources

Any group exists for the purpose of attaining some goals with the help of available resources. These resources may be tangible like men, materials, and money or intangible like power, status or the manager's time. No organisation is capable of providing all the resources demanded by various units. Resources are limited and different groups have to compete for these scarce resources and many conflicts arise from this source.

### Diversity of Goals

Groups in organisation have different functions to perform and as such they develop their own norms and goals. Theoretically the achievement of these goals should achieve overall organisational goals but, often, in real life the reverse is true. Goals of one group are incompatible to the goals of another group. Take, for example, a company which manufactures electric fans that has a seasonal demand. Three departments marketing, production and finance-are involved. Since the demand for the product is seasonal, the marketing manager would like to have sufficient stock during the season. The production department has to gear up its capacity during the season but because of a tight labour market finds it difficult to hire labour temporarily and resorts to employ people on a permanent basis. This creates another problem. The finance manager says that as the storage costs are high it is expensive to keep stock build up in the slack season, and maintaining the production line during slack season imposes an additional burden.

This example shows that each department develops its own goals, which may conflict with another department's goals and one department may try to achieve its goals at the expense of another. This happens quite often when the reward system is linked to group performance rather than to overall organisational performance.

### Task Interdependence

Groups in an organisation do not function independent of one another. They have to interact with one another in order to accomplish their tasks. The sales department will have nothing to sell unless the production people produce goods and goods can not be produced unless the financial department comes up with the money to buy raw materials. Thus smooth interaction between various groups is essential for the efficient functioning of the organisation. Three types of interdependence can cause intergroup conflict-pooled, sequential and reciprocal. **Pooled interdependence**

exists when two work groups may not directly interact with each other but are affected by each other's actions. For example, when one independent product group performs poorly, all other groups may suffer financially, This can happen when rewards are contingent upon collective performance.

**Sequential interdependence** occurs when one group's performance depends on another group's prior performance. In a construction project, for example, the excavating team must prepare the foundation before the masons can work on the building structure. Since the masons depend on the excavators, conflict between the groups can occur when the excavators' work is delayed.

**Reciprocal interdependence** occurs when two or more groups are mutually interdependent in accomplishing their tasks. For example, in developing and marketing a new product, three major departments (marketing, production and research) depend on each other to perform their tasks. Information possessed by one department is needed by another department. For example, the research department needs market information from the marketing department, and marketing needs research to provide customer services. When one group is unable to meet the expectations of another group, intergroup conflict usually results.



## Differences in Values and Perception

A lot of conflict is generated within organisations because various groups within the organisation hold 'conflicting' values and perceive situations in a narrow, individualistic manner. An example that comes readily to mind is that of the management-labour conflict. Labour feels that management is exploiting it because in spite of making a profit, management does nothing for the economic welfare of labour. On the other hand, management feels that the profits should go to cash reserves so as to make the company an attractive proposition for investors. Another example is the conflict between engineering and manufacturing. Engineering lays stress on technological sophistication and precision and is accused by manufacturing of designing products that will last for 50 years but that the customers cannot afford. Similarly, engineering accuses manufacturing of making products of such limited durability that the company's reputation suffers.

## Organisational Ambiguities

As implied, conflict may emerge when two organisational units compete over new responsibility. Intergroup conflict stemming from disagreement about who has responsibility for ongoing tasks is an even more frequent problem. Newcomers to organisations are often struck by the ambiguity that exists about job responsibilities. Few organisations make extensive use of job descriptions or periodically update the job descriptions that do exist. Further, it is rare that the manager or employee consults his own job description. Managerial and staff jobs by their very nature are difficult to structure tightly around a job description.

## Introduction of Change

Change can breed intergroup conflict. Acquisitions and mergers, for example, encourage intergroup conflict, competition, and stress. When one organisation is merged into another, a power struggle often exists between the acquiring and acquired company. An attempt is usually made to minimise conflict by laying out plans for power sharing before the acquisition or merger is consummated. Frequently, the acquired company is given representation on the board of directors of the acquiring company. Nevertheless, power struggles are difficult to avoid.

## Nature of Communication

One of the major fallacies abounding about conflict is that poor communication is the cause of all conflicts. A typical statement is: "If we could just communicate with each other, we could eliminate our differences". Such a conclusion is not surprising considering the little time most of us have at our disposal communicating with one another. At the same time, evidence does suggest that problems in the communication channel such as noise, distortion, omission and overload do affect the process of collaboration and lead to misunderstanding. The potential for conflict increases when either too little or too much communication takes place. Apparently, an increase in communication is functional upto a point, whereafter it is possible to overcommunicate with a resultant increase in potential for conflict. Too much information as well as too little information can lay the foundation for a conflict;

## Aggressive Nature of People

Another factor that has a large potential for generating conflict within an organisation is personality characteristics that account for individual idiosyncracies and differences. Evidence suggests that certain personality types-for example, individuals who are highly authoritarian, arrogant, autocratic and dogmatic-lead to potential conflict. People have a natural need to find an outlet for their aggressive tendencies. Organisations are sometimes used as arenas for expression of aggression-'blowing off steam'-leading to conflict.

This discussion on the sources of conflict is intended to emphasise that it is not possible to design an organisation which will remain conflict-free for all times to come. Conflict is inevitable in an organisation as some of these sources will always remain in any organisation. However, these sources are not to be confused with the causes of a conflict. A conflict, in ultimate analysis, is caused by perceptions and feelings people experience when an incompatibility exists between what they want and what someone

else wants. When perception of incompatibility and feeling of frustration generate actions, conflict is manifested.

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**Activity 1**

Which sources of conflict have contributed most in the conflict examples that you have given in your earlier exercises? Is one particular source more recurrent than others? Could you identify some other sources of conflict so as to make the list more comprehensive? Prepare a revised list of sources with examples from yours and your friends' experiences.

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**10.7 MODES OF CONFLICT MANAGEMENT**

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We can now move on to examine the modes through which conflict can be handled so as to result in optimal unit performance. You have already seen that when conflict level is too low, the unit performance is also likely to be low and there is a scope for a perceptive manager to stimulate conflict in order to enhance the performance of the group. Similarly, when the level of conflict is too high, conflict needs to be resolved so as to restore high performance and optimal level of conflict. So, in this section, we shall examine both the strategies of conflict management-stimulation as well as resolution.

**Stimulating Productive Conflict**

Most of us since childhood have been taught to avoid conflict and even disagreement, How many times have you heard the statements "Don't Argue", "Stop fighting" or "It's better to turn the other cheek"? However, this tendency to avoid conflict is not always productive and there are times when there is a need to stimulate conflict. In an interesting experiment, series of groups were formed to tackle a problem. Some groups contained a planted member to challenge the majority opinion, some groups did not have. Without fail, all groups that had a planted member came up with a more perceptive solution than the other groups. However when the groups were asked to drop a member, all groups that had a planted member chose to drop the dissenting member despite clear evidence that the conflict was beneficial. Such resistance to conflict is what managers have to overcome in stimulating productive conflict.

Robbins (1978) suggested the following as signs where conflict stimulation is needed:

- 1 The organisation is filled with "yes men".
- 2 Employees are afraid to admit ignorance.
- 3 Compromise is stressed in decision making.
- 4 Managers put too much emphasis on harmony and peace.
- 5 People are afraid of hurting the feelings of others.
- 6 Popularity is given more importance than technical competence.
- 7 People show great resistance to change.
- 8 New ideas are not forthcoming.
- 9 There is an unusually low rate of employee turnover



The presence of one or more of these signs is usually an indication of the need for conflict stimulation. Once the need has been identified you may adopt one or more of the following techniques:

- 1 Manipulate Communication Channels**
  - a) Deviate messages from traditional channels
  - b) Repress information
  - c) Transmit too much information
  - d) Transmit ambiguous or threatening information
- 2 Alter the Organisation's Structure**  
(redefine jobs, alter tasks, reform units or activities)
  - a) Increase a unit's size
  - b) Increase specialisation or standardisation
  - c) Add, delete or transfer organisational members
  - d) Increase interdependence between units
- 3 Alter Personal Behaviour Factors**
  - a) Change personality characteristics of leader
  - b) Create role conflict
  - c) Develop role incongruence

These are only a few of the suggestions possible. Depending upon your values and the organisation's value-system, some of the suggestions may even sound unethical as you may feel that a desirable end-state does not always justify the questionable means (like transmitting threatening information). We leave it for you to decide. But if by stimulating your value-conflict, we become successful in helping you to understand the important option of conflict stimulation, we shall consider that such conflicts are functional.

### **Resolving Interparty Conflict: How and When**

You have seen that stimulating conflict is a required mode of conflict management when groups are characterised by apathy, complacency, non-responsiveness to needed change, lack of enthusiasm for generating alternatives, etc. Though these symptoms are very much present in a number of work-units in Indian organisations (and hence calls for appropriate conflict stimulation interventions), the more commonplace are heightened manifest conflicts. So, for most practical purposes, you should not only possess the knowledge of different strategies of conflict-resolution but should also know when to use which strategy.

There is no dearth of literature in this area and different authors have given different taxonomies in reviewing possible conflict resolution strategies. Here we consider Feldman's (1985) strategies of intergroup conflict-resolution.

The primary dimension along which intergroup conflict-resolution strategies vary is how openly you as a manager should address the conflict. The chief characteristic of **conflict-avoidance** strategies is that they attempt to keep the conflict from coming into the open. The goal of **conflict-defusion** strategies is to keep the conflict in abeyance and to "cool" the emotions of the parties involved. Conflict-containment strategies allow some conflict to surface, but tightly control which issues are discussed and the manner in which they are discussed. **Conflict-confrontation** strategies are designed to uncover all the issues of the conflict and try to find a mutually satisfactory solution.

### **Conflict-avoidance Strategies**

#### **Ignoring the Conflict**

This strategy is represented by the absence of action. You, as a manager, have often avoided dealing with dysfunctional aspects of conflict. Unfortunately, when you avoid searching for the causes of the conflict, the situation usually continues or becomes worse over time. Although ignoring the conflict generally is ineffective for resolving important policy issues, there are some circumstances in which it is at least a reasonable way of dealing with problems. One such circumstance in which ignoring the conflict is a reasonable strategy is when the issue seems to be symptomatic of other, more basic conflicts. For example, two groups may experience conflict over the amount and quality of office space. Such conflicts often reflect more important issues



about relative power and status. Resolving the office space problem would not address the key issues, and attention could be directed more fruitfully to the more basic concerns.

### **Imposing a Solution**

This strategy consists of forcing the conflicting parties to accept a solution devised by a higher-level manager. Imposing a solution does not allow much conflict to surface, nor does it leave room for the participants to air their grievances, so it also generally is an ineffective conflict-resolution strategy. Any peace that it does achieve is likely to be short-lived. Because the underlying issues are not addressed, the conflict reappears in other guises and in other situations.

Forcing a solution can, however, be appropriate when quick, decisive action is needed. For instance, when there is conflict over investment decisions, and delays can be very costly, forcing a solution may be the best strategy available to top management. Likewise, it may be necessary when unpopular decisions must be made and there is very little chance that the parties involved could ever reach agreement (Thomas, 1977). An example of this is when an organisation must cut back on the funding of programs. It is unreasonable to expect that any department would agree to cut its staff and expenses for the greater good, yet some hard unpleasant decisions ultimately must be made.

## **Conflict-defusion Strategies**

### **Smoothing**

One way you can deal with conflict is to try to "smooth it over" by playing down its extent or importance. You may try to persuade the groups that they are not so far apart in their viewpoints as they think they are, point out the similarities in their positions, try to "pat" group members whose feelings have been hurt, or play down the importance of the issue. By smoothing the conflict, you can hope to decrease its intensity and avoid escalation or open hostility. Like forcing a solution, smoothing generally is ineffective because it does not address the key points of conflict.

However, smoothing sometimes can serve as a stop-gap measure to let people cool down and regain perspective. In the heat of the battle, people may make statements that are likely to escalate the conflict, and smoothing often can bring the disagreement back to a manageable level. Smoothing also may be appropriate when the conflict concerns nonwork issues. For instance, intergroup conflict frequently occurs between older and younger employees because of their different political beliefs and moral values. Smoothing can help to defuse the tension so that the conflict does not spill over into central work issues.

### **Appealing to Superordinate Goals**

You can defuse conflicts by focusing attention on the higher goals that the groups share or the long-range aims that they have in common. This tends to make the current problem seem insignificant beside the more important mutual goals.

Finding superordinate goals that are important to both groups is not easy. Achieving these goals requires cooperation between the groups, so the rewards for achieving the goals must be significant. The most successful, and most frequently used, superordinate goal is organisational survival, i.e., if the subunits do not cooperate sufficiently, the continued existence of the larger organisation itself will be severely jeopardised.

## **Conflict-containment Strategies**

### **Using Representatives**

One of the strategies you can use to contain conflict is the use of representatives. In order to decide an issue, you can meet with representatives of the opposing groups rather than deal with the groups in their entirety. The rationale is that the representatives know the problems and can argue the groups' points of view accurately and forcefully.

Although this seems to be a logical way of proceeding, the research on the use of representatives as a means of solving intergroup conflict is fairly negative. Representatives are not entirely free to engage in compromise; rather, they must act out of loyalty and are motivated to win (or at least avoid defeat) even though a



solution to the intergroup problem may be sacrificed in the process. A representative who "gives in" is likely to face suspicion or rejection from group members, so if a representative cannot win, he or she will try to deadlock a solution or at least forestall defeat.

Although individual representatives have difficulty in negotiating an agreement because of their fear of rejection by their groups, two situational factors can increase the effectiveness of this strategy. First, the use of group representatives from each side can help to overcome individual anxiety about group rejection. The members of each team can provide mutual support when they need to make concessions in order to achieve agreement. Also, groups of negotiators may receive broader support and trust from their respective sides, since each representative may represent a different constituency or bring a different expertise to the negotiations. Most labour negotiations involve several representatives of both management and labour.

Resolving conflict through representatives is more effective before positions become fixed or are made public. After positions become fixed, representatives become even more intransigent, and "given in" is more likely to be attributed to the personal failure of the representatives than to situational factors.

### **Structuring the Interaction**

Some managers assume that one way to decrease conflict is to increase the amount of contact between the groups (if the groups interacted more, they would like each other better and fight less). In reality, increased interaction can merely add fuel to the fire; the two groups spend their time looking for additional reasons to reinforce their negative stereotypes of each other:

However, structuring the interaction between the groups can be effective in resolving conflict. Providing a framework on how many issues are discussed and the manner in which they are discussed can facilitate conflict resolution. There are many ways to structure the interaction between groups to deal with conflict; some of the most effective strategies include: (a) decreasing the amount of direct interaction between the groups in the early stages of conflict resolution; (b) decreasing the amount of time between problem-solving meetings; (c) decreasing the formality of the presentation of issues; (d) limiting the recitation of historic events and precedents and focusing instead on current issues and goals and (e) using third-party mediators.

All these strategies allow some conflict to surface but prevent it from getting out of hand and reduce hardening of the groups' positions. Decreasing the amount of direct interaction between the groups early in the conflict helps to prevent the conflict from escalating. Decreasing the amount of time between problem-solving meetings helps to prevent backsliding from tentative agreements. Decreasing the formality of the presentation of issues helps to induce a problem-solving, rather than a win-lose orientation to the conflict. Limiting how far back historically and how widely precedents can be cited helps to keep the focus on finding a solution to the current conflict. Finally, a mediator can act as a go-between, who transmits offers and messages, helps the groups to clarify their positions, presents each group's position more clearly to the other, and suggests some possible solutions that are not obvious to the opposing parties.

Structuring the interaction is especially useful in two situations: (a) when previous attempts to discuss conflict issues openly led to conflict escalation rather than to problem solution; and (b) when a respected third party is available to provide and enforce some structure in the interactions between the groups.

### **Bargaining**

Bargaining is the process of exchanging concessions until a compromise solution is reached. Bargaining can lead to the resolution of a conflict, but usually without much openness on the part of the groups involved and without much real problem solving. Typically, in bargaining each side begins by demanding more than it really expects to get. Both sides realise that concessions will be necessary in order to reach a solution, but neither side wants to make the first concession because it may be perceived as a sign of weakness. Thus, each party signals a willingness to be flexible in exchanging concessions without actually making an explicit offer; a tacit proposal can be denied later if it fails to elicit a positive response from the other party. Bargaining continues until a mutually satisfactory agreement is reached, although such a solution can be



reached without much open discussion of the conflict issues and without much effort to solve the underlying problems. Therefore, bargaining often results in a compromise agreement that fails to deal with the problem in a rational manner and is not in the long-term interests of either group.

For bargaining to be feasible at all as a conflict-resolution strategy, both parties must be of relatively equal power. Otherwise, one group simply will impose its will on the other, and the weaker group will have no means of obtaining concessions from the stronger one. Bargaining also is more likely to work if there are several acceptable alternatives that both groups are willing to consider. Otherwise, bargaining is likely to end in a deadlock.

### **Conflict-confrontation Strategies**

#### **Problem Solving**

Problem solving is an attempt to find a solution that reconciles or integrates the needs of both parties who work together to define the problem and to identify mutually satisfactory solutions. In problem solving, there is open expression of feelings as well as exchange of task-related information. Alderfer (1977) summarises the most critical ingredients in successful problem solving:

- 1 Definition of the problem should be a joint effort based on shared fact finding rather than on the biased perceptions of the individual groups.
- 2 Problems should be stated in terms of specifics rather than as abstract principles.
- 3 Points of initial agreement in the goals and beliefs of both groups should be identified along with the differences.
- 4 Discussions between the groups should consist of specific, non-evaluative comments. Questions should be asked to elicit information, not to belittle the opposition.
- 5 The groups should work together in developing alternative solutions. If this is not feasible, each group should present a range of acceptable solutions rather than promoting the solution that is best for it while concealing other possibilities.
- 6 Solutions should be evaluated objectively in terms of quality and acceptability to the two groups. When a solution maximises joint benefits but favours one party, some way should be found to provide special benefits to the other party to make the solution equitable.
- 7 All agreements about separate issues should be considered tentative until every issue is dealt with, because issues that are inter-related cannot be settled independently in an optimal manner.

There are two preconditions for successful, integrative problem solving. The first is a minimal level of trust between the groups. Without trust, each group will fear manipulation and may not reveal its true preferences. Secondly, integrative problem solving takes a lot of time and can succeed only in the absence of pressure for a quick settlement. However, when the organisation can benefit from merging the differing perspectives and insights of the two groups in making key decisions, integrative problem solving is especially needed.

#### **Organisational Redesign**

Redesigning or restructuring the organisation can be an effective, inter-group conflict-resolution strategy. This is especially true when the sources of conflict result from the coordination of work among different departments or divisions. Unlike the other strategies discussed so far, you may note, organisational redesign can be used both to resolve the conflict or to stimulate it.

One way of redesigning organisations is to reduce task inter-dependence between groups and to assign each group clear work responsibilities (i.e., create self-contained work-groups) to reduce conflict. This is most appropriate when the work can be divided easily into distinct projects. Each group is provided with clear project responsibilities and the resources needed to reach its goals. A potential cost of this strategy is duplication and waste of resources, particularly when one group cannot fully utilise equipment or personnel. Innovation and growth also may be restricted to existing project areas, with no group having the incentive or responsibility to create new ideas.





The other way to deal with conflict through organisational redesign is to develop over-lapping or joint work responsibilities (e.g. integrator roles). This helps in Management ,, of maximising the use of the different perspectives and abilities of the different departments. but as you have already seen, it also tends to create conflict. On the other hand. there may be tasks (e.g., developing new products) that do not fall clearly into any one department's responsibilities but require the contributions, expertise, and corrdination of several. Assigning new-product development to one department could decrease potential conflict but at a high cost to the quality of the product. In this case, you might try to sustain task-based conflict but develop better mechanisms for managing the conflict. For example, providing "intergrating teams" can facilitate communication and coordination between the members of interdependent departments.

**Activity J**

In your organisation there is a conflict between two departmental heads on the allocation of budget. Department A feels that they should he given additional funds for its proposed new activities in the offing. Department B objects saving that the parity between the departments should not be disturbed.

What do you think is the source of the conflict? What strategy do you recommend? Why? Prepare a report, share it with another experienced manager and compare your views with him.

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**Activity K**

In a hank, there is a conflict between the hank management and the stiff-association on the ratio of employees to he promoted in vacant positions to those a he recruited through open competition. The two parties differed markedly on the issue of proportion of promotees versus direct recruits.

What strategy do you recommend? Contact a person working in a bank. Ask whether his bank faced the same kind of issue. How was the issue managed? Compare that strategy with your recommended strategy.

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**Activity L**

Interview friends who are working in different organisations. Collect as many cases of successful as well as unsuccessful attempts at resolving conflicts of different ature. Compare the practices actually followed with your understanding of process of conflict, sources of conflict and available strategies for conflict management. Prepare analytical reports putting successful and unsuccessful cases side by side.

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## 10.8 SUMMARY

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In this Unit we have considered mainly various types of inter group conflicts, as these types are most pervasive and important from the point of view of organisation effectiveness. In keeping with our emphasis on intergroup conflict, we have defined conflict as a process which begins when A, as one party, perceives that B as the other party is making some conscious efforts to frustrate A in pursuing his interests or goals. Besides intergroup conflicts, there are other types of conflicts as well: Intra-individual, interpersonal, intergroup and between organisation. In general, conflict process has four stages of potential antagonism, cognition and personalisation, conflictive and conflict-coping behaviour, and conflict aftermath. We have examined three different views on conflict-traditional, behavioural and interactionist. The current view of conflict is that it is not only inevitable, but could be desirable as well. Depending upon the nature, intensity, duration and the way it is handled, it could be functional leading to higher goal attainment or dysfunctional leading to goal failure. The section on the sources of conflict has focused attention on a number of factors like competition for limited resources, diversity of goals of different units, task interdependence of different units, differences in values and perception etc. which are always present in an organisation as the antecedent condition for most of the conflicts.

There are different modes of managing conflict in an organisation. When a work-group shows the symptoms of over-emphasising conformity, compromise, consensus, popularity etc., there may be need for stimulating conflicts by manipulating communication channels, organisation structure and personal behaviour of the manager. These techniques are to be used to shake the group up from its slackened postures.

There are four distinct strategies of conflict resolution because as a manager you need to know when and how to resolve conflicts. While avoidance and defusion strategies allow little or no conflict into the open, containment and confrontation strategies deal with the conflict more openly and thoroughly. Which strategy is most effective depends on how critical the conflict is to task accomplishment and how quickly the conflict must be resolved. If the conflict arises from a trivial issue and/or must be resolved quickly, a conflict-avoidance or conflict-defusion strategy is most likely to be effective. If the conflict centres around an important work issue and does not need to be solved in a short period of time, a conflict-containment or conflict-confrontation strategy is most likely to be effective.

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## 10.9 SELF-ASSESSMENT TEST

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- 1 What is the difference between functional and dysfunctional conflicts? How can one handle both?
- 2 Briefly review the process of conflict.
- 3 Discuss the influence of process on the outcomes in dealing with conflict in organisations.
- 4 Is conflict inevitable? If so, how should one deal with it?
- 5 Analyse two instances of inter-departmental conflicts in your organisation. Examine the changes, if any, you notice in the sources, processes, strategies and outcomes.

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## 10.10 KEY WORDS

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**Antecedent Conditions:** The source of conflict where cause for conflict exists in an incipient form, but it need not necessarily lead to actual conflict.

**Approach Approach Conflict:** Conflict between two equally attractive choices.

**Approach-Approach Conflict:** Conflict between two equally attractive choices. repulsion towards the same object.

**Avoidance-Avoidance Conflict:** Conflict between two equally unpleasant choices, or in choosing the lesser evil.



**Avoidance:** Withdrawal from or suppressing conflict.

**Bargaining:** Is a conflict containment or resolution strategy that involves mutual compromise and concession.

**Behavioural View of Conflict:** The belief that conflict is an inevitable outcome in any group.

**Conflict Aftermath:** Refers to the consequences that different conflict handling strategies may have on the antecedent conditions. It may either resolve the conflict or make for future conflict.

**Conflict Handling Behaviour:** It refers to the conscious action of one party to the conflict in checking the other party from reaching his goals.

**Conflict Resolution:** Refers to the manner in which a manager could address himself to a conflict situation. The chief modes are avoidance, defusion, containment and confrontation.

**Conflict Stimulation:** Refers to a situation when common values are challenged. It can often be a useful way of re-examining one's position and discovering alternatives.

**Confrontation Strategy:** Is a strategy designed to uncover all the issues of the conflict and find a mutually acceptable solution. It can be accomplished through the openness of problem solving, or through a comprehensive organisation redesign.

**Containment Strategy:** Is a strategy of controlled conflict management where issues are selectively discussed through mediating representatives, or by structuring the interaction patterns or through bargaining.

**Delusion Strategy:** Attempts to keep conflict in abeyance and cast tempers through smoothing or by appeal to super-ordinate goals.

**Dysfunctional Conflict:** Conflict that hinders group performance.

**Felt Conflict:** Emotional involvement in a conflict creating anxiety, tenseness, frustration, or hostility.

**Functional Conflict:** Conflict that supports the goals of the group and improves its performance.

**Goal Diversity:** The efficient functioning of every part of an organisation requires formulation of its own immediate goals, which may or may not be compatible with overall organisation objectives.

**Interactionist View of Conflict:** The belief that conflict is not only a positive force in the group, but that it is absolutely necessary for a group to perform effectively.

**Intergroup Conflict:** Conflict between the various constituent units of an organisation such as Unions and Management, between various functional areas, etc.

**Interpersonal Conflict:** Conflict between various individuals in an organisation which may stem from personal dislikes, personality differences, or role related matters.

**Intragroup Conflict:** Conflict within a group between various individuals due to lack of consensus or inability to conform to group norms.

**Intrrpersonal Conflict:** Conflict within the individual, involving a decision regarding the choice to opt for in any instance of behaviour.

**Manifest Conflict:** It results from perceived and/or felt conflict. Conflict comes out into the open and influences action.

**Perceived Conflict:** Awareness by one or more parties of the existence of conditions that create opportunities for the rise of conflict. It is different from felt conflict in that it is not personalised.

**Problem Solving:** Bringing about change or resolving conflict through interpersonal discussions; seeks to identify differences.

**Smoothing:** Conflict defusion by playing down its importance, thereby avoiding escalation and letting people regain their perspective.

**Superordinate Goals:** The long range aims or higher goals that are common to all in an organisation even in a conflict situation.

**Task Interdependence:** The mutual inter-connectedness of responsibilities of various parts of an organisation that is essential for efficient functioning.

**Traditional View of Conflict:** The view th<sup>at</sup> all conflict must be avoided.



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## 10.11 FURTHER READINGS

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