

LESSON NUMBER 4

TASK: CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

CONDITION: In a small group discussion environment.

STANDARD:

- Define conflict.
- Define the levels of conflict.
- Describe the sources of conflict.
- Explain the positive and negative factors of conflict.
- Describe the methods for managing conflict.

TIME OF INSTRUCTION: 2 Hours

INSTRUCTOR NOTE: If possible, obtain and show videotape of The Abilene Paradox.

LEAD IN: During this lesson we will discuss conflict and conflict management. Unfortunately, conflict can lead to a variety of communication problems and misunderstandings. Conflict in and of itself is neither bad nor good, but in our attempt to deal with conflict, we determine its constructive or destructive consequences. The purpose of this training is to help you understand how and why interpersonal conflict can occur and provide you with some strategies for positive or constructive resolution.

PART I. DEFINITION

1. *The Nature of Conflict.* The term conflict was originally defined as "striking at another", "to fight with an enemy or do battle with opposing forces." Later meanings included "being antagonistic", or "a clash between contradictory impulses within an individual."
2. Conflict is inevitable because people will always have different viewpoints, ideas, and opinions. The issue is how will you deal with or relate to these differences. It is unfortunate that negative connotations are often associated with conflict, because, if properly managed, conflict is highly constructive and essential to cross-cultural interactions.
3. *Levels of Conflict.* There are three levels of conflict. If we are to have a clear understanding of conflict, it is important to know the three levels and their relationship to each other.
 - a. Level one: Intrapersonal conflict is an experience that takes place within the individual.

Ask the group for an example. (An example would be a soldier who feels guilty about telling sexual or ethnic jokes but vigorously participates when friends are around.)

b. Level Two: Interpersonal conflict is experienced between individuals in the same location, e.g., coworkers, roommates, team members. It exists whenever people interact or come together to accomplish a common goal or objective.

c. Level Three: Intragroup conflict is defined as conflict between groups in the same organization or command. Sources of intragroup conflict are often caused by issues of group cohesion, such as "sticking together, leadership and status, power or influence and lack of or limited resources."

Ask the group for examples. (An example would be NCOs versus Officers or senior NCOs versus the junior enlisted.)

4. *Sources of Conflict.* Trying to identify or determine the cause of conflict is sometimes difficult. Heightened emotions or bad feelings may cloud the real cause of any conflict and detract soldiers from examining the facts. The cause of conflict can also have multiple factors which makes it difficult to isolate just one cause. The following is a list of common causes in conflict situations:

- a. Different values and beliefs.
- b. Perception differences.
- c. Diverse goals or objectives.
- d. Group status or identity.
- e. Race, ethnicity, or gender differences.
- f. Personality clash or conflict.
- g. Disagreement on how things should be done.
- h. Tension and stress.

Discussion Question: Ask the group if they have had a recent conflict situation that depicted a situation involving one of these factors in this unit. How did it affect teamwork?

5. *Characteristics of Negative Forces.* Many believe that the negative characteristics of conflict occur because group members become closed minded to any compromises. It often occurs when someone wants his or her own way. Hostility among group members is normally followed by an assumption of competition that someone will win and someone will lose. These negative forces have destructive consequences.

6. *Characteristics of Positive Forces.* Earlier we stated conflict was neither good nor bad. If viewed as a natural process, conflict is the opportunity to explore and resolve differences in a constructive manner. Conflict is constructive when individuals or group members have a new understanding of the functions of healthy conflict and avoid the destructive negative forces.

Discussion Question: Ask the group if they have had a recent conflict situation where there was a positive force working. How did it affect teamwork? (Examples: Increase individuals pride and group cohesiveness; promotes personal and social change; provides opportunity to work towards a common goal.)

PART II. STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVELY MANAGING INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT

1. *Methods for managing conflict.* Given the right opportunity and motivation all conflict can be resolved but not always to the satisfaction of all parties. The effect of disagreement and the methods for resolution depend on how conflict is managed by the participants.

2. The following are some common methods that can help to effectively manage conflict.

a. Denial or Avoidance. With this approach, individuals attempt to reduce or get rid of the conflict by denying it exists, both parties shun each other or dodge the issue of disagreement.

b. Suppression. "We all get along here", "we run a happy ship", "don't rock the boat", and "nice people don't fight", are the voices of suppression. People who use suppression play down their differences in a belief it is better to "go along to get along."

c. Power or Dominance. Power is often used to settle differences. The source of power may be physical, or vested by authority or position. Power strategies, however, result in a win-lose situation. In other words, in order for somebody to gain something, somebody else has to lose something. Normally the loser will not support the final decision in the same way as the winner, and may even attempt to sabotage the decision.

d. Third Party Intervention. Using this strategy requires a third party that is unbiased and is not taking sides to support either party in conflict. The third party may be known or unknown to the parties involved or may even be from a different location. Some assumptions in using a third party are:

- (1) The third party is trusted or respected by participants.
- (2) All parties involved will accept the decision of the third party.
- (3) The third party has the power or authority to rule over the decision.

(4) The third party is an expert, has knowledge or is competent to give a decision about the issue(s) in dispute.

(5) All parties believe a just and fair decision will be rendered.

Discussion Question: Can you see any drawbacks in using a third party? (A: third party may consciously or unconsciously instigate or aggravate a conflict by playing individuals against each other.)

e. **Compromise or Negotiation.** Compromise and negotiation are often regarded as virtues in our culture. Compromise is an agreement between parties about what each should give or get in a particular situation. "You give a little, and I'll give a little so we can meet each other halfway", is a way we have been taught to get along with others. It is believed all parties will profit from the compromise or at least have a feeling of being treated fairly. Negotiation reaches an impasse when one or all participants become set in what they are willing to give and limits have been reached. The compromise, therefore, would allow all parties to reach an agreement with which all would be somewhat satisfied or rewarded.

f. **Integration or Collaboration.** This approach requires all parties in a conflict situation to recognize the legitimate abilities and expertise of each other in the process of resolution. This method attempts to find an acceptable solution that does not necessarily require giving and getting as in a compromised solution. The group problem solving concept is considered the optimum form of managing conflict because it encourages a common search for creative alternatives to resolve the conflict that is rewarding to all parties.

Discussion Questions: During this squad's/unit last conflict, what method of conflict management was used to resolve the conflict? Did this method work? If not which method would have worked?

PART III. CLOSING

During this period of instruction we defined conflict, explored various levels of conflict, and identified sources of conflict, and strategies to manage interpersonal conflict. Additionally we discussed the positive aspects, components of conflict and how it can contribute to individual and group problem solving. We examined six strategies for effectively managing interpersonal conflict and the negative and positive attributes of each. Are there any questions about the methods for resolving conflict?