Editorial

Understanding individual and gender differences in conflict resolution: A critical leadership skill

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ABSTRACT

Background: Conflict is an unavoidable facet of relationships, and all leaders should have familiarity with the origins of, responses to, and resolutions of conflicts.

Objective: Readers will become familiar with several concepts key to conflict generation and resolution.

Conclusions: Conflicts might arise from incompatibility of behaviors or actions between two or more actors. Understanding concepts such as the Ladder of Inference or Thomas-Kilmann response patterns are useful in becoming facile with conflict management and resolution.

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Case

Alexander (Dr. A), Bethany (Dr. B), and Christopher (Dr. C) are equal partners in a busy private dermatology practice. There are a limited number of clinic rooms and support staff, and the three physicians have struggled to create a mutually agreeable clinic schedule.

Dr. A is the senior partner and takes 3-day weekends to travel with his spouse, who is retired. As the senior partner, Dr. A feels he should have priority in scheduling requests. Dr. B is mid-career and has children in daycare and elementary school. She requests a regular, unchanging schedule to simplify her childcare arrangements. Dr. C is the newest partner, recently graduated from residency, and is eager to work as many clinics as possible to pay off loans and start building savings. Dr. C has fewer weekly clinics than either of his senior partners.

Dr. C. recently e-mailed his partners to request more clinic time. He proposed a complex rotating schedule so that each partner has equal clinic time over the course of a month. Dr. A has not responded to the e-mail. He interprets Dr. C's demands as evidence of entitlement and does not want to change the schedule to which he and his patients have grown accustomed. Meanwhile, Dr. C's repeated emails reflect his increasing frustration and impatience. Dr. C feels that both Drs. A and B are taking advantage of his newer status in the practice, which makes him wonder whether he made the right decision to join this practice.

“Peace is not the absence of conflict but the presence of creative alternatives for responding to conflict – alternatives to passive or aggressive responses, alternatives to violence.”

[– Dorothy Thompson]

Definition of conflict

Conflict is “an interactive state in which the behaviors or goals of one actor are at some degree incompatible with the behaviors or goals of some other actor or actors” (Tedeschi et al., 1973) and is an inextricable feature of relationships. Conflict may emerge from a discrepancy in agenda, personality, status, or context between two or more parties. Some people find conflict disquieting whereas others appear to thrive on it, but we all have to deal with it. How we respond to conflict informs how we stand to benefit, or suffer, from interpersonal relationships. For this reason, all people—and particularly organizational leaders—stand to gain from learning about the anatomy of conflicts, including the sources of, responses to, and resolutions of conflicts. The following is a brief primer on key concepts needed to successfully navigate conflict in any environment, with specific mention of gender differences in conflict resolution.
Dr. C filters these observations to mean the senior partner of the team (and he doesn’t care that he burdens the rest of us).”

From our case, Dr. A responds to the scheduling conflict with something akin to “we just do what we’ve always done?” Meanwhile, Dr. C responds collaboratively by suggesting the complex rotating schedule. Dr. C then interprets these observations to mean the senior partner gets the schedule he wants and assumes that the junior partner draws the short straw when it comes to scheduling.

The Ladder of Inference is a concept originally described by behavioral scientist Chris Argyris (1990) that demonstrates the process of belief formation and explains how two people can observe the same raw data yet arrive at very different conclusions. The Ladder of Inference is a common pathway toward conflict.

An individual starts climbing the Ladder of Inference (Fig. 1) through direct observation of facts and formation of an initial hypothesis or assumption. From this point onward, the individual’s personal frame of reference (informed by identity, prior beliefs, experiences, culture, gender, etc.) influences every subsequent step up the Ladder. After making observations, the individual selectively chooses data to strengthen his or her conviction or belief in the assumption, finally reaching firmly held conclusions. Over time, the formation of these beliefs enhances the likelihood of identifying evidence to support prior conclusions and ignoring data that might support the opposite or an alternative hypothesis. In other words, the beliefs formed at the top of the Ladder reflexively update the frame of reference at the base such that all observations eventually confirm prior beliefs. Individuals are often not conscious of this process and hence are unaware that they may not be seeing or hearing the full story. This process reinforces positions held by conflicting parties, rendering seeing or believing the other party’s view(s) very difficult.

An example of the Ladder of Inference and its role in conflict generation can be taken from our case. Dr. C observes several things about Dr. A: 1) He is married; 2) he takes extended vacations; and 3) he is the senior and oldest partner in the practice. Of these facts, Dr. C filters them to “Dr. A is the senior partner” and “he always takes Fridays off, which puts a burden on the rest of the team (and he doesn’t care that he burdens the rest of us).” Dr. C then interprets these observations to mean the senior partner draws the short straw when it comes to scheduling. Dr. C may then conclude that Dr. A is taking advantage of him and go on to believe that Dr. A is unfair and disrespectful. Dr. C’s belief then becomes part of his frame of reference, which then influences his future interactions with Dr. A. Because of the Ladder of Inference, Dr. C may be less able to hear or recognize Dr. A’s attempts to create solutions for scheduling parity.

Concept #2: Responses to conflict, the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument

The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (Thomas and Kilmann, 1974) depicts responses to conflict as balances of agenda versus relationship. Figure 2 maps the five common patterns of conflict response: avoiding, competing, compromising, accommodating, and collaborating. Most individuals have a tendency to exercise one or more dominant patterns of conflict response, and frame of reference as discussed earlier influences how people respond. Several available instruments allow for the determination of personal conflict response styles.

Gender may also influence predictable differences in conflict resolution styles. Several studies have shown that women prioritize relationships over agenda more frequently than men during times of conflict. In one study of undergraduate students, women were more likely to be collaborative while men were more likely to be avoidant (Brahnam et al., 2005). Another study found that men and women both tended to be more agenda-focused at work and more relationship-focused at home but that women were broadly more relationship-focused than men (Chusmir and Mills, 1989).

However, conclusions on gender and conflict response have not been entirely consistent. A more recent study of postgraduate students in Malaysia found that women were more likely to be competing (i.e., higher focus on agenda and lower focus on relationship) than men, who were more likely to be avoidant. The same study found that younger individuals placed greater emphasis on relationship than older individuals, who were more likely to be avoidant (Gbadamosi et al., 2014). This conclusion might reflect intergenerational differences in conflict, especially in the workplace, with millennials as active collaborators (i.e., frequently wanting to be involved in decisions, even for minor agenda points). Generation X-ers as compromisers, and baby boomers as largely avoidant.

The lack of consistency in gender-patterned responses to conflict is probably the result of (the scientifically necessary) assumption of ceteris paribus in defining individual frame of reference. In the workplace, gender issues may be intimately linked to differences in hierarchy and may escalate Ladders of Inference for conflict participants of both genders based on history and prior experiences. In other words, gender is only one—albeit significant—factor in defining a frame of reference.

From our case, Dr. A responds to the scheduling conflict with avoidance and rhetorically asks, “What is the problem? Why can’t we just do what we’ve always done?” Meanwhile, Dr. C responds collaboratively by suggesting the complex rotating schedule. Dr. B responds by compromising between the asks of Drs. A and C. Sacrificing clinic space does not support her agenda, but she aims to preserve the relationships.

Tying it together: Strategies to resolve conflicts

When searching for resolutions to conflicts, considering the difference between position and interest is useful. A person’s position is the specific agenda (the “what” the person hopes to achieve), whereas his or her interest is the reason for wanting to achieve the agenda (the “why”). Importantly, positions allow for less flexibility during conflict resolution than interests. For example, Dr. A is interested in spending more time with his spouse. To achieve
that end, he has taken the position that he has worked hard during his career and would like to finally take more of the trips that he and his spouse had put off in previous years.

Dr. C does not mind working on Fridays but feels that taking one for the team by scheduling Friday clinics should earn him the right to more Monday-through-Thursday clinic time. He also feels that as an equal partner, he should not have less clinic time than his partners. In this case, Dr. C’s desire to schedule more clinics is his position, and his interests are increased income and perceived equal standing with his partners. Dr. B is interested in all parties feeling respected, which influences her considered position of sacrificing a clinic spot to Dr. C. She is also interested in securing a regular schedule to simplify her childcare arrangements, which explains why she has taken the position of rejecting Dr. C’s rotating schedule.

Each doctor rests on a high rung of the Ladder of Inference, making it difficult to see each other’s perspectives. They have not sat down as a group to discuss the issue, because all communications occurred through e-mail only, with intermittent periods of silence or nonresponse. This results in a situation ripe for conflict in which people’s positions are clearly stated, their interests are not known, and they are less able or willing to look for solutions because they are unable to see or hear their partners’ perspectives. When parties in conflict become recalcitrant in defending their positions, moving the conversation from positions toward interests can be helpful. Instead of taking Fridays off, perhaps Dr. A would be agreeable to taking Mondays off and still achieve his 3-day weekend trips. Dr. C might be willing to invest the additional overhead needed to open a clinic session on Saturday. Dr. B might be willing to work more half-day clinics as long as long they are regularly scheduled. Focusing on interests, although often more time-consuming, is a more reliable way to identify creative solutions that satisfy all parties involved and is a fundamental tenet of collaborative conflict resolution.

Each of the Thomas-Kilmann responses can be appropriate and useful depending on the specifics of a conflict. An essential first step in developing competency handling conflict is to recognize our predominant conflict response style and to note when this style may be advantageous or hindering. For example, in times of crisis or emergency, it is often more important to be right (and to be directive) than to allow team members to save face or spare feelings (be relationship oriented). In situations where preserving the relationship is more important than achieving a specific end, a leader can choose to be more accommodating to team members, especially those lower in the professional hierarchy.

Mastering flexibility to use all five types of responses is a key leadership skill, ideally selecting the conflict style most suitable to a given situation based on the balance of agenda and relationship. This may be especially true for female leaders to know when being directive or being accommodating is critical; women still face a double standard disfavoring a consistently assertive or aggressive style. There might be times when a leader would benefit by extricating herself from a conflict all together and hence choosing to be avoidant—for example, when neither the agenda nor the relationship is important. Developing flexibility to actively choose responses that differ from our default modes thus requires accurate reading of the situation at hand and vital self-reflection. Considering the Ladder of Inference before, during, and after difficult conversations, as well as an analysis of positions over interests, can promote self-understanding, skillful navigation of potential conflicts, and adaptability in conflict response.

Conclusions

Conflict presents challenges but also presents rich opportunities for improved relationships and problem solving. Skillful management of conflicts is an invaluable skill for women in leadership positions. We hope that the tools presented in this paper will be useful starting points in understanding potential origins and responses to conflict.

Conflict of Interest

None.
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