

Conflict Analysis Paper

Managing Conflict Through Collaboration

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Overview

The purpose of this paper is to manage a conflict with my spouse using a collaborative problem-solving structure. First I will discuss this process in detail and summarize how each step works. Then I will outline the background of this conflict and show the dialogues before and after using this problem-solving process. Then I will analyze the two dialogues and show how I can apply this process of conflict management to other aspects of my life. Finally I'll conclude with some closing remarks and offer feedback about managing my conflict through collaboration.

Managing Conflict Through Collaboration

We all have conflict in our lives. As such we need to find effective ways to manage our conflicts. One way is through collaboration, where you use negotiation strategies to create a win-win framework (Beebe, Beebe, & Redmond, 2014, p. 248). It's like the opposite of arguing 'my' side against 'your' side in a fight that has only one winner. Instead we work together by focusing on our shared goals and interests – a problem we both have and want to solve together (Beebe, Beebe, & Redmond, 2014, p. 247). Viewing the problem as shared puts us on the same team, it aligns our goals and focuses on the problem at hand without creating a conflict within the conflict.

This collaborative problem-solving structure has five straightforward steps to success. They are 1) define the problem, 2) analyze the problem, 3) Determine the goals, 4) generate multiple solutions, and 5) select the best option (Beebe, Beebe, & Redmond, 2014, p. 249). Seems easy right? Let's take a minute to unpack each of these steps in detail to see where and how the magic happens.

Step one is to "define the problem". You might think you know what the problem is, but it may not be as clear to the other person. Relationships can be very complicated. You may view the problem as a dirty house that needs to be cleaned, but your spouse may think the problem is you don't appreciate all the things she does. Before you can work collaboratively to fix a problem you need to agree on what the problem is. This is the time to understand *what* the problem is.

The next step is to "analyze the problem". This is the time to review how the problem affects each of us – physically, emotionally or otherwise. Tell your side of the story, then hear the others account of what happened. Take care to separate the problem from the person (Beebe, Beebe, & Redmond, 2014, p. 248). Acknowledge their feelings and perspective and leave judgment and complaints out of your discussion (Beebe, Beebe, & Redmond, 2014, pp. 248-249). At all times keep the focus on the problem. For two people to collaborate they need to work together and be other-oriented.

The third step is to “determine the goals”. Decide what you want to achieve and allow your partner to communicate their desires. Make sure each goal is quantifiable and the criteria are objective so that accomplishing the goal will be easily understood by all involved (Beebe, Beebe, & Redmond, 2014, p. 250). Another important aspect to this step is to determine whether your goals overlap (Beebe, Beebe, & Redmond, 2014, p. 247). Finding a ‘mutual goal’ will keep this process collaborative. It will be much easier to find a reasonable solution for both parties when you are focused on a shared objective.

The fourth step in this collaborative problem-solving structure is to “generate multiple solutions”. Now’s the time to brainstorm and the more solutions you can generate the greater the probability of success (Beebe, Beebe, & Redmond, 2014, p. 250). At this point in the process both parties should understand the problems and the goals. Take turns coming up with possible solutions, be creative. Build off of each other’s ideas and write them all down (Beebe, Beebe, & Redmond, 2014, p. 250). At this point in the process there’s no such thing as a bad idea, so again, remove judgment and grievances – focus on working together.

The final step is to “select the best solution”. It may take more than one pass through these steps to find the ‘best solution’ for both parties. It’s ok to go back and re-analyze the problem or re-adjust the goals and objectives. It’s important that both people understand the shared problem and agree on the goals. An important concept to keep in mind during this solution selection stage is the idea of face. **Face** is a person’s positive self-image that they seek to maintain (Beebe, Beebe, & Redmond, 2014, p. 250). It’s important that the best solution is one that everyone involved ‘saves face’. Finding a solution to your conflict is important, but it may not be as important as your relationship with the other person. If your relationship is in jeopardy, the best solution may be to drop it and let it go for now. But if you are able to find a favorable solution to everyone, now’s the time to agree and reaffirm each person’s understanding and involvement in the solution.

Throughout this five step problem-solving process you should take turns talking. Taking turns when discussing a conflict has been shown to increase the likelihood of the problem being managed effectively (Beebe, Beebe, & Redmond, 2014, p. 245). It’s also important to actively listen and avoid **selective listening** (Beebe, Beebe, & Redmond, 2014, p. 127). *Really* listen to what the other person is saying and pay close attention to both their verbal and nonverbal communications. Lastly, be empathetic. Try to understand the other person not just with your head, but with your heart as well (Beebe, Beebe, & Redmond, 2014, p. 246). Take the time to understand your partners perspective and feelings, they may give you insight to their point of view and give you a better understanding of how this problem affects them (Beebe, Beebe, & Redmond, 2014, p. 247).

Background of Conflict

The conflict that I've chosen to write about is a classic around my house. It is a reoccurring problem that always seems to affect the relationship between my spouse and I. As back-story we have been married for almost 14 years and have two children together. We are very much in love and have similar interests and life goals. But there is one thing that separates us – cleanliness. There is no better a representation of our differing cleaning practices than our bedroom. One side is minimal with things put in their place and the other side has magazines and laundry that may or may not be garbage or dirty. It's not that she's messy – she's just disorganized.

Our conflict is a **simple conflict** (Beebe, Beebe, & Redmond, 2014, p. 228) by nature. This conflict is brought upon by our differing ideas and definitions of a clean and organized house. However, often times this conflict escalates to an **ego conflict** (Beebe, Beebe, & Redmond, 2014, p. 229) where our emotions run high and we attack each other in a personal nature.

Comparative Dialogues

The following dialogue is a typical encounter with this conflict. First I'll write the dialogue as it normally happens (Dialogue A), then I'll implement the problem-solving process and see what kind of differences a well defined process can make on our dialogue (Dialogue B).

Dialogue A

This is a conversation between me (ME) and my wife (WIFE).

ME: Honey this house is an absolute mess.

WIFE: It's not my fault!

ME: It doesn't matter whose fault it is, we need to figure out a way to get it clean and keep in clean.

WIFE: Well I can't do it all by myself, you're always so busy with school. And I'm busy with the kids, my job and everything else.

ME: I know we're both busy, but don't you want it clean?

WIFE: I do, but not as clean as you want it to be all the time.

ME: I don't need the house to be immaculate. I just want it to be a little more organized and for us to keep it clean.

WIFE: There's only so much time in the day...

ME: I'm not asking you to do it all, we just need to figure out a system.

WIFE: You're too busy with work and school you don't have time for chores.

ME: I can try to make time. It's just that sometimes I don't know what is garbage and what you want to keep.

WIFE: Just let me sort through it.

ME: I try, but when it piles up it becomes too big of a job to do and then nothing gets done.

WIFE: What do you want for dinner?

ME: Come on babe let's try to figure out a solution.

WIFE: The kids are getting restless. Let's talk about this later.

ME: OK.

Dialogue B [using the problem-solving process]

Now let's run that conversation again, this time using the five collaborative problem-solving steps to help resolve this issue.

1) Define the problem

ME: Honey do you have time to talk?

WIFE: Sure, what's up?

ME: I want to figure out a way for us to keep our house clean. I don't want to place blame or point fingers I just want to work together to solve this problem.

WIFE: What is the problem? The house isn't clean enough?

ME: I think the problem is that we're not working together to fix this issue. We both want a clean house right?

WIFE: Of course.

ME: Well I suggest we figure out a way to fix this conflict by keeping the house cleaner and more organized.

WIFE: I also want the house to be cleaner, what do you suggest?

ME: I think that if we work together, define some strategies and keep each other in mind we'll be able to keep the house cleaner and less disorganized.

WIFE: So the problem is to find a way to keep the house clean and to avoid all the clutter?

ME: Exactly.

COMMENTS: This time when I started the conversation I made sure that my wife had time to talk about it. All too often we are interrupted by needy children or our own busy lives and I wanted to make sure that we would have time to fully flesh out this problem and its potential solutions. I also tried to focus on the problem and make sure that we both agree that it is an issue we want resolved. My wife also took the time to clarify my message by paraphrasing my response and verifying that she understood it. It's at this point that we're able to move on to step #2.

2) Analyze the problem

WIFE: So how do we keep the whole house clean?

ME: I think that if we can control certain areas of the house we'll be able to keep it all a lot cleaner. Like the mail that piles up on our table, if we can agree to sort through this paper and get rid of what we don't need we'll cut down on the amount of clutter in the kitchen. The same thing goes for the laundry that piles up, if we can sort clean from dirty and not let it pile up we'll have less clutter around our room and bathroom.

WIFE: OK, so you want me to be more organized?

ME: I want us both to be more organized. This isn't your problem or my problem this is our problem that we can solve together. My books and school papers clutter up the desk and make it hard for others to use. That's something that I need to be more organized with.

WIFE: So you're saying that if we are a little more organized that it'll be easier to keep the house clean?

ME: Exactly. Once we remove the spots of clutter we'll be able to focus on the normal cleaning like vacuuming, dusting, dishes, etc. This will hopefully be less work if we remove the areas of clutter.

COMMENTS: As my wife and I are analyzing the problem we're taking turns trying to understand the others perspective. Again my wife paraphrases my feelings to make sure that they're understood (a trait that I realized she does quite a bit). Also during this time, we're both trying to avoid making this a personal battle. It doesn't matter who is responsible for the mess, we are both responsible for it's clean up. There's no reason to point fingers or assign blame because that will only keep our conflict from getting resolved.

3) Determine the goals

WIFE: What do you mean by a "clean house"?

ME: I don't want us to kill ourselves to make sure every inch of the house totally sterile. I just want there to be less clutter and have everything put in its place. What about you, how clean do you want the house to be on any given day?

WIFE: I want there to be less clutter and for the house to be clean, but I don't need spotless.

ME: I totally agree, I don't want spotless, I just don't want dirty and disorganized.

WIFE: Me too.

ME: So our goal is to keep the house free from clutter and to keep it clean, but not overdo it by trying to make the total house spotless.

WIFE: I agree, that would be nice.

COMMENTS: During this step it's important that my wife and I discuss what 'clean' really means. We both know that my idea and her idea of clean are not the same, so we worked to find a common ground. We both want the house free of clutter and for it to

be basically clean. We also both agree that having a spotless house is not what we're after, just less mess and better organization.

4) Generate multiple solutions

ME: So how are we going to do this? Let's take turns brainstorming ideas.

WIFE: What if we take turns throughout the week, you clean Monday and Wednesday and I clean Tuesday and Thursday.

ME: That could work then we could have the kids clean some on the weekends.

WIFE: Or we could have the weekends off as free time.

ME: How about we set up a chore chart, where everyone is given certain responsibilities to do throughout the week.

WIFE: How about we assign rooms, you would be in charge of the living room and bathroom and I could be in charge of keeping the kitchen and our bedroom clean.

ME: Yeah and we could switch off every week so that you're not always washing dishes.

WIFE: That could work. We could also look into hiring a maid or bringing in a cleaning service to help us.

ME: If we can afford it, that would be awesome.

COMMENTS: Now that my wife and I understand the problem and have aligned our goals we work on figuring out ways to achieve them. All of our ideas have merit we just need to take the next step and chose the best fit.

5) Select the best option

WIFE: So of all these, which way do you think will work best?

ME: I think any of them would work; we just need to agree to it and hold ourselves accountable.

WIFE: I like the idea of taking turns throughout the week, that way we're not cleaning everyday. How about you?

ME: I like that option too, but how will we decide what needs to be done each day?

WIFE: I think that if we're really cleaning everyday there won't be huge messes and entire rooms to clean. Instead each day will be spent with upkeep and won't require tons of time to do.

ME: You're right, if we really do keep up on it everyday there won't be as much to clean as there is right now.

WIFE: Speaking of that, how do we get the house cleaned up to start?

ME: Let's do it as a family tomorrow afternoon. We'll get some donuts and make a day out of it. What do you say?

WIFE: I like it. Let's do it. If we can do what we're saying we'll do then we'll for sure have a cleaner, more organized house!

COMMENTS: Selecting the best option was fairly easy. To be honest any of our solutions would've worked, we just needed to agree on one and implement it. In

selecting the option that we did it was important that both of us were happy and satisfied with the decision. It's critical to come to this decision as a team to ensure that we're both committed to our conflicts resolution.

Analysis

The outcomes to Dialogue A and Dialogue B were very different. With Dialogue A, nothing was resolved. The conversation in Dialogue A was cut short by my wife avoiding conflict using the **demand-withdrawal pattern of conflict management** (Beebe, Beebe, & Redmond, 2014, p. 235). This is where a person will make a demand and the other avoids the issue by changing the subject. This was avoided in Dialogue B by choosing an opportune time and making sure that we're both ready to start (and finish) this process.

Dialogue A was more of an argument than an attempt to resolve conflict. Emotions and blame are aplenty in our initial dialogue. In contrast, with Dialogue B, time was taken to address the problem and to analyze how it made us feel and what specifically we wanted resolved. In Dialogue A, I storm into what I don't like and almost demand a solution be made. With Dialogue B both of us are given time to explore our own desires and to properly understand the desires of the other. Take for example the idea of 'clean'. What one views as clean may not be what the other person thinks clean should be. With Dialogue B those issues were addressed and we were able to find common ground where we both want less disorganization and a generally clean house.

The biggest difference between Dialogue A and Dialogue B (aside from the resolution) is that with Dialogue B we used **collaboration** (Beebe, Beebe, & Redmond, 2014, p. 238). Dialogue A is more of a **compromise** (Beebe, Beebe, & Redmond, 2014, p. 238) than collaboration. With Dialogue A all the focus is on a solution and to find the middle ground of our conflict. With Dialogue B we use the process to achieve a positive and beneficial solution for both of use.

Application

It's clear to me with how the second dialogue went that this problem-solving process when done correctly is highly effective. Taking the time to go through each step and discuss everything has several advantages. For starters it keeps up on the same page and gives us the necessary avenues to fully discuss and analyze the issues and how they impact each of us. It allows us to gain perspective on the other and to figure out ways to solve the conflicts collaboratively.

I also believe that this collaborative style is the best style for a married couple. Two people who are committed to one another and who share problems are going to find more success using collaboration. This style creates a win-win framework that gives

both people a sense of accomplishment and creates a situation where everyone wins. Solving problems with competition, compromise, accommodation or avoidance may work in some cases but the best approach seems to be with collaboration.

Conclusion

“If you think of conflict as bad, you’re missing out on some wonderful opportunities” (Clark). Conflict is normal and if managed correctly can be a positive experience. I have had this same basic conflict with my wife for many years and after using this approach just one time I felt like real progress was made. Sure we’ve made goals and plans before, but we never really took the time to go through each of the outlined steps. At the end of this exercise my wife and I both commented how beneficial it was to make sure we understand the problem and how it affected the over person. Taking the time and effort to complete each step created a sense of togetherness and camaraderie. Working collaboratively created a situation where it was us versus the problem instead of us versus each other.

References

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