Conflict at work

Lesson 6.3.3 | Organisational psychology

Core ideas

Workplace conflict can happen within a person, between individuals, within a group or between groups.

Organisational causes of conflict include unclear roles, scarce resources, workload pressure and incompatible goals.

Interpersonal causes include personality clashes, communication problems, perceived unfairness and damaged trust.

Thomas-Kilmann describes five conflict-handling modes: competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding and accommodating.

No conflict-handling mode is always best; the usefulness depends on urgency, relationship needs, power and the importance of the issue.

Einarsen describes workplace bullying as repeated negative acts that can escalate from aggression to bullying, stigmatisation and serious harm.

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Key terms

Intra-individual conflict: Conflict within one person, such as incompatible work demands or values.

Inter-individual conflict: Conflict between two or more individuals.

Intra-group conflict: Conflict within the same team or work group.

Inter-group conflict: Conflict between different teams, departments or groups.

Competing: A conflict mode high in assertiveness and low in cooperativeness.

Collaborating: A conflict mode high in assertiveness and cooperativeness, aiming for a win-win solution.

Accommodating: A conflict mode where one side gives way to preserve the relationship or satisfy the other side.

Workplace bullying: Repeated negative behaviour at work where the target struggles to defend themselves.

Further detail and evidence

Conflict levels: intra-individual is within a person (competing goals); inter-individual is between people; intra-group is within one group; inter-group is between groups. Causes include scarce resources, incompatible goals, role ambiguity, interdependence, perceived unfairness and communication problems.

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Continued

Thomas-Kilmann combines assertiveness with cooperation: competing is high assertiveness/low cooperation; collaborating is high on both; accommodating is low assertiveness/high cooperation; avoiding is low on both; compromising seeks a middle ground. No mode is universally best for every urgency and relationship.

Bullying is repeated negative treatment over time where a target has difficulty defending themselves. Einarsen (1999) distinguishes dispute-related escalation from predatory targeting. Work-related acts undermine tasks; person-related acts include ridicule, exclusion and threats.

The described escalation runs from aggressive behaviours to bullying, stigmatisation and severe trauma. Causes can involve leadership, poor psychosocial conditions, power and interpersonal processes. The review draws together research rather than reporting one newly randomised bullying experiment.

Applying the ideas

Two departments competing for one budget illustrate inter-group conflict. Working jointly to redesign resource use is collaboration; splitting the budget midway is compromise. Persistent targeted exclusion with unequal power differs from a single ordinary disagreement between equal colleagues.

Evaluation and connections

Sensitive research relies on confidential accounts and clear definitions. Retrospective reports cannot establish every causal sequence. Explaining contextual risks does not justify mistreatment or imply the target caused it. Use both individual and organisational evidence; avoid treating a conflict-handling questionnaire as a complete account of power.