



Conflict Management

Qi Wang

Associate Professor of Communication, Villanova University

What is it?

Conflict management refers to the process of using preferred strategies to handle a conflict with goals to limit its negative impact and enhance its positive impact. Conflict refers to attitudinal, behavioural, or resource-related incompatibility perceived by at least one of the interdependent parties in a given context. Whereas *conflict resolution* is focused on reducing or eliminating conflict, *conflict management* is focused more on strategic implementation for positive outcomes.

The most influential theory around conflict management is based on the managerial grid developed by two management theorists, Robert R. Blake and Jane S. Mouton, in 1964. With revisions and additions, the grid is now used to describe five main conflict management strategies: integration (a win-win strategy that seeks to maximize mutual benefit by open communication), accommodation (a win-lose strategy by giving up one's own needs to satisfy the other's), domination (a lose-win strategy by maximizing one's own needs without considering the other's), avoidance (a lose-lose behaviour by withdrawal), and compromise (a give-and-take strategy to meet mutual needs in the middle).

Who uses the concept?

Conflict management is used in business management, marketing, communication contexts such as in interpersonal (e.g., family, marital, and friendship.), organizational (e.g., macro-level, inter-team, and supervisor-subordinate), intercultural (e.g., host-guest, adaptation, and competence), and public relations (e.g., multinational companies and local residents). It is also used for training in various

types of contexts (e.g., healthcare, higher education, and community) and counselling.

Fit with intercultural dialogue?

Conflict management has a natural fit with intercultural dialogue because cultural differences make conflict preordained. People are often unaware that such conflict tends to be pseudo-conflict: Perceived incompatibilities often result from lack of familiarity of the other's cultural values and norms rather than discordancy. Open, ethical, and empathetic intercultural dialogue is essential for successful conflict management.

What work remains?

First, future research should incorporate situational contingencies in implementing and evaluating effective strategies. Second, different types of conflict such as task-related and social emotional conflicts should be distinguished, especially in workplace contexts. Third, people should consider both destructive and constructive nature of conflict and management strategies. Conflicts may help interactants identify their different needs. Through seeking best ways to satisfy both parties' needs, they may gain a better understanding of each other and reach a new level of relational satisfaction. Thus, effective conflict management is effective communication.

Resources

Blake, R. R., & Mouton, J. S. (1964). *The managerial grid: The key to leadership excellence*. Houston, TX: Gulf.

Rahim, M. A. (2002). Toward a theory of managing organizational conflict. *International Journal of Conflict Management*, 13, 206-235.