



ConvergenceCoaching, LLC
Managing Conflict Successfully - If Not Cheerfully!
Article 2 of 2

In the last article on this topic, I shared the reasons why conflict can be a positive influence on your practice and provided you with important background information to help you identify your own “fall back” conflict management style. In addition, I introduced you to six underlying reasons that conflict exists to better understand *why* conflict arises when it does.

In this concluding article, we’ll explore a step-by-step conflict management methodology and review a sample scenario that will help you further develop or enhance your conflict management skills.

The **first step in managing conflict successfully is defining the conflict itself**. In this step, you’ll acknowledge that a conflict exists and begin exploring the reasons that might be causing it. So, the next time you’re irritated, frustrated, disappointed or downright angry, stop and look for the place in your life where a conflict exists. Then, identify who the conflict is with and, using the six underlying causes we explored in our last article, ask yourself what the conflict may be caused by.

Sample Scenario: Your lead project manager has not completed an important schedule update for a client by the agreed upon time and you are frustrated because you feel this isn’t the first time it’s happened. The client has called or e-mailed and is looking for the new schedule.

To complete the first step, you would acknowledge that you are having a conflict with your project manager and that it has to do with the timeliness of his/her deliverables. When you contemplate potential reasons why, you might acknowledge that your project manager may have too many projects and hasn’t had time yet to complete the new schedule (scarcity of resources) or they may not understand the importance of the commitment or didn’t perceive a firm commitment was made (communication failure). When you take the time to contemplate the reasons for the conflict, you will probably discover that responsibility for the conflict does not lie solely with your project manager and you should feel an easing of your irritation with them.

The **second step is to commit to discuss the conflict** with the other party or parties. In our example, you’ll set the stage for a “live” discussion (never in e-mail!) with your project manager to occur at a time and place that meets the following criteria:

- It is private, so that you can speak freely;

- It is at a time when you can be professional, so if you're angry, you would schedule it to occur after you have cooled off;
- It will enable you to fully explore the issues and possible solutions, without being rushed or pushed for time.

Once you've established your meeting time, you'll want to enter **the preparation step, which is step three**. In this step, you'll outline, preferably in writing, your view of the situation without blame. Think of the conflict in terms of your having expected something, but instead you experienced a different result.

In our sample scenario, you'll acknowledge that you expected the project schedule to be updated and delivered to the client by X and that, as far as you are aware, that time has passed and the schedule has not been delivered. If you feel this has happened on other occasions, you would only discuss them if you can review the other times it occurred with the same level of specificity, so you'll want to document those incidents as part of your pre-discussion preparation.

You'll also consider the potential or real consequences of the conflict. In our example, the consequences could be disappointment or dissatisfaction from the client or clients with whom commitments are not kept, which can lead to billing disputes or even client departures. In addition, another potential consequence is the loss of time spent between you and your project manager trying to resolve inquiries on late deliverables or handle client complaints – time that could be redirected to more positive activities.

The last aspect of the preparation step is to examine possible solutions to the conflict based upon the different potential reasons you considered in step one. In our example, if the reason your project manager has not delivered the new schedule is because they haven't had time, then the potential solutions could be to determine if there are ways to (a) fit more time into their work week, for instance updating the schedule from home in the evening or weekend; (b) balance their project workload so that they have more time; (c) ask them to advise you of this ahead of time so that you can help them yourself; or (d) encourage them to write detailed notes while in the client meeting so that they can hand off the written notes to an office administrator who can update the schedule for them.

Once you've thought through several potential reasons and solutions, then you're ready for **step four, which is the sharing step** where you'll meet with your project manager and share your view of the conflict. In this step, you'll identify your expectation and your observation of the situation. Using our example, you might say, "I wanted to meet with you because I've observed recently with client A and client B that you've committed to complete updated schedules for them by specific dates, but haven't delivered those updated schedules on time."

Notice that in this step, we avoid placing blame or using inflammatory words like, “always,” “never,” and “should have.” Instead, we simply share our view based on facts that we can substantiate and then end this step with a question to encourage our conflict partner(s) to speak. This question might be something like, “Can you let me know if you agree that this is the situation and, if so, why you haven’t been able to keep those commitments?”

This will allow you to transition to **the most important step in process – step five, listening.** In this step, you will allow your project manager to share his/her views of the situation and you will listen carefully as they are very likely to have new information or a perspective that will provide clues as to how to solve the conflict.

In our example, the project manager might share that they realize their deliverables have been late in these instances, but that they thought it was acceptable because they are so busy with many client commitments and they’ve noted that you are frequently late with your client deliverables, too. This piece of new information may cause you to contemplate a variation on your solution ideas, but we’re not ready to go to the solution yet.

The **sixth step is to discuss the consequences** of late deliverables and to share what you’re committed to as it relates to the resolution. You’ll outline the consequences you feel are occurring and ask if the conflict partner sees others. In our sample scenario, you might say, “I realize that I may be late on client deliverables and didn’t realize that you were taking your queue from me, but I should have. The impact of our collective late deliverables is that our clients begin to distrust our commitments, they become disappointed, they call us to ask about them and we have to spend energy explaining our delays. All of this could lead to client dissatisfaction or even client loss. I am committed that we keep our client promises and deliver what we say we’re going to on time.”

From here, you’re ready to enter **the seventh step where you’ll ask for help in developing a solution.** The best way to begin this step is to say something like, “What do you think we can do to ensure that we keep our client commitments from now on?” Then, you’ll quietly listen while your conflict partner suggests solutions. Sometimes, the solutions suggested don’t meet your expectations or you don’t believe they will lead to success. In that case, you can suggest your proposed solution or solutions.

In our example, this might sound something like, “I appreciate those ideas. I was thinking that we should meet weekly to review our client commitments and discuss upcoming deadlines to see if we need to redistribute work. If you know you’re going to miss a deadline, I’d like to request that you inform me immediately so we can reset client expectations or rearrange your schedule to meet the commitment. And, now that I know you perceived that client deliverable deadlines were less important based upon my behavior, I’ll pay extra attention to ensure that I’m meeting them, too.” The solution

development stage may take some collaboration back and forth to come to an agreed upon plan of action. This stage will end with your asking a question to ensure that your conflict partner is enrolled, or bought in, to the solution. This might be something like, "How do you feel about this plan? Do you think it will work to resolve this issue?"

The **eighth and last step is to document your understanding of the new action plan** in a brief e-mail to your conflict partner, focusing on the specific actions you both committed to you and any by-when dates that may have been generated, too. This is an important step as it serves to eliminate future conflicts based upon communication gaps.

Conflict management may not be at the top of your "fun" list - but, when well managed, it can produce relationship breakthroughs and create new paradigms in your practice. Follow this eight step conflict methodology and begin to develop your conflict resolution capabilities - the more you practice, the easier (and fewer) your conflicts.

ConvergenceCoaching, LLC™ Conflict Management Methodology

- **Step One: Definition.** A conflict exists. With whom? What is it? Why is it occurring?
- **Step Two: Commitment.** Schedule a time to talk.
- **Step Three: Preparation.** Think through the conflict – what did you expect and how has the result differed? Why might this be? What are the consequences of the different result? What are the potential solutions to this conflict?
- **Step Four: Sharing.** Share your view of what you had expected to happen and what you perceive did happen instead. Ask a question that encourages your conflict partner to share.
- **Step Five: Listening.** Listen for whether the conflict partner agrees that there is an issue and why they feel it is occurring. Stay focused on new information that may arise or possible clues to a solution.
- **Step Six: Consequences and Recommitting.** Outline any consequences that you see resulting from the conflict and ask if the conflict partner sees others. Restate your commitment.
- **Step Seven: Collaborating.** Ask for your conflict partner's help in developing a solution to the problem you've identified. Listen carefully and then help refine the solution or offer alternatives. Ensure you have agreement on the resolution and close with appreciation.
- **Step Eight: Documenting.** Document your understanding of the resolution in writing and ask your conflict partner to respond with any corrections or comments so you're both on the same page. Do what you say you're going to do, when you say you're going to and expect the same of your conflict partner.

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