

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/242299308>

Conflict Resolution

Chapter · January 2010

DOI: 10.1002/9780470479216.corpsy0219

CITATION

1

READS

35,882

1 author:



[Taya R. Cohen](#)

Carnegie Mellon University

103 PUBLICATIONS 3,183 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



The WECT Project: Workplace experiences and character traits [View project](#)



The Honesty Project [View project](#)

Running Head: CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Conflict Resolution

Taya R. Cohen

Northwestern University

Cohen, T. R. (2010). Conflict resolution. In I. B. Weiner & W. E. Craighead (Eds.), *The Corsini Encyclopedia of Psychology, 4th edition, Volume 1* (pp. 390-391). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/9780470479216.corpsy0219>

Key words: Conflict Resolution; Conflict Management; Cooperation; Competition; Intergroup

Conflict

Conflict Resolution

Conflict occurs in situations where two or more interdependent parties (either individuals or groups) have interests, outcomes, and/or goals that are incompatible in some way (Deutsch, 1973; Deutsch & Coleman, 2000; Kelley et al., 2003; Schelling, 1980). If the parties are completely independent or if their interests, outcomes, and goals are completely compatible, then no conflict can exist because, to put it colloquially, there is nothing to fight about. Conflict can occur in both cooperative and competitive contexts (Deutsch, 1973), as well as in “mixed-motive” contexts that are marked by a combination of competitive and cooperative features (Kelley et al., 2003; Schelling, 1980). When the parties’ interests are generally compatible or positively correlated, then resolving the conflict requires coordination (Kelley et al., 2003; Schelling, 1980). Coordination involves working together to find a solution to a common problem. Consider a situation in which a husband and wife must decide how to spend their evening. The husband would prefer to go to a baseball game while the wife would prefer to go to the movies, but both would rather be accompanied by their spouse than attend either event alone. One possible solution to a conflict of this sort would be coordinated alternation, such that on one evening both go to the husband’s preferred destination, but on the next evening both go to the wife’s preferred destination. Communication, assuming it is trusted, is extremely helpful in resolving coordination conflicts because it allows the parties to work out mutually beneficial agreements (Fisher & Ury, 1981; Schelling, 1980).

Unfortunately, not all conflicts are marked by compatible interests. Difficult and destructive conflicts generally occur when interests and outcomes are incompatible or negatively correlated, and the parties perceive them as such. One effective way of resolving conflicts of this sort is to reframe the situation into one that is marked by compatible rather than incompatible

interests (Cohen & Insko, 2008; Deutsch & Coleman, 2000; Fisher & Ury, 1981). Consider the 1978 conflict between Israel and Egypt regarding which country would control the Sinai Peninsula. At the outset, Israel and Egypt's positions were in complete opposition because only one country could control the disputed territory. As discussed by Fisher and Ury (1981), this conflict was ultimately resolved through a creative solution that reconciled the two sides' compatible underlying interests rather than their incompatible stated positions. Israel's underlying interest was safety—they did not want tanks close to their border. Egypt's underlying interest was sovereignty—they wanted to maintain the integrity of centuries-old borders. The eventual peace accord allowed Egypt to retain control of the Sinai, but required them to demilitarize it. This resolution to the conflict involved reframing the situation from one characterized by a competitive conflict of interests in which only one side could “win” to a situation characterized by compatible interests in which both sides could obtain mutually beneficial outcomes (Fisher & Ury, 1981).

As illustrated by the Sinai Peninsula example, reframing a conflict such that cooperation is seen as more attractive than competition is one possible conflict resolution strategy. The difficulty with this strategy is conceptualizing how to transform the situation into one in which cooperation is valued. Making parties aware of their similarities and shared goals is one method for enacting a cooperative transformation (Cohen & Insko, 2008). Once Israel and Egypt realized that they both shared the overarching goal of a peaceful coexistence, they could focus on developing a solution to their mutual problem of deciding who should control the Sinai.

What are other methods for promoting cooperation? Cohen and Insko (2008) discussed three additional conflict resolution strategies that are particularly effective at promoting cooperation between groups: future-oriented thinking, empathy, and independent leadership.

Encouraging groups to consider future consequences of competitive behavior increases intergroup cooperation. A simple strategy for inducing future-oriented thinking is to ask each side to consider how their own competitive actions will likely affect the other side's future actions. Future-oriented thinking can also be promoted by using a tit-for-tat strategy to interact with opponents and making it salient that there will be multiple interactions with the other side, as opposed to just one. Future-oriented thinking is effective at reducing conflict because it makes group members realize that the long-term costs of competition are often far greater than any short-term benefits. This realization tends to reduce distrust of the other side, and cooperation is promoted by reductions in distrust (Cohen & Insko, 2008).

Fostering feelings of empathy is another potential conflict-resolution strategy (Cohen & Insko, 2008). Individuals who feel empathy for other individuals are less likely to behave aggressively toward them and are more likely to behave prosocially and cooperatively. Although empathy for opposing groups is sometimes difficult to generate, it can be helpful for reducing conflict. One way to promote empathy for opposing groups is through intergroup contact. Studies of intergroup contact between the Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland and the Tamils and the Sinhalese in Sri Lanka have revealed that empathy generated by intergroup contact can help promote positive relations between groups with long histories of conflict.

Can strong leaders make peace? Research suggests that they can (Cohen & Insko, 2008; Deutsch & Coleman, 2000). However, leaders who wish to foster intergroup cooperation must be given some independence from their constituency so that they have the freedom to cooperate with those toward whom their more extreme base might prefer to compete. Of course, not all leaders will be swayed to act cooperatively by independence. Reduced accountability allows less ethical leaders to pursue their own selfish goals. But, if a group's leader is a moral or ethical

person, a certain degree of independence is likely to be quite helpful for negotiating cooperative deals with other groups (Cohen & Insko, 2008).

Although conflict, at times, can be constructive, more often than not it is destructive (Deutsch, 1973; Deutsch & Coleman, 2000). Resolving or managing conflict effectively requires implementing strategies that promote cooperation. Cooperatively reframing the conflict, encouraging future-oriented thinking, fostering empathy for the opposing side, and giving group leaders a measure of independence in their decision making are several strategies that can be used to promote cooperation. Hopefully, future research will shed light on additional conflict resolution strategies so that interpersonal and intergroup conflicts throughout the world do not take a destructive course.

References

- Cohen, T. R., & Insko, C. A. (2008). War and peace: Possible approaches to reducing intergroup conflict. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 3, 87-93.
- Deutsch, M. (1973). *The resolution of conflict: Constructive and destructive processes*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Deutsch, M., & Coleman, P. T. (Eds.). (2000). *The handbook of conflict resolution: Theory and practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Fisher, R., & Ury, W. (1981). *Getting to yes*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Kelley, H. H., Holmes, J. G., Kerr, N. L., Reis, H. T., Rusbult, C. E., & Van Lange, P. A. M. (2003). *An atlas of interpersonal situations*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Schelling, T. C. (1980). *The strategy of conflict*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.