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Conflict and Conflict Management: Reflections and Update

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Introduction

It has been almost 20 years since I wrote the first draft of the chapter on 'Conflict and conflict management' for the first edition of *The Handbook of Industrial and Organizational Psychology* (Thomas, 1976). I have now rewritten that chapter for a second edition of the *Handbook*. This paper reflects back upon that first work and its impact, and outlines the changes in my thinking.

The 1976 Handbook chapter

I am, by inclination, an integrative theorist, uncomfortable without conceptual models that reconcile facts and perspectives into some larger framework. The opportunity to write the *Handbook* chapter provided an opportunity to explicitly develop that kind of framework for what was, at the time, a relatively fragmented literature. With the benefits of hindsight, the following is a brief description of key influences upon the theoretical framework that evolved.

Definition of conflict

Early definitions of conflict had focused on a wide variety of different phenomena (see Mack and Snyder, 1957; Fink, 1968). For example, Pondy (1967) had sorted these definitions into several categories: antecedent conditions, emotions, perceptions and behaviors. Rather than pick one of these specific definitions, Pondy had argued for the adoption of a broad working definition of conflict as the entire process that encompassed these phenomena. While Pondy's suggestion provided a useful general direction for the development of integrative theory, I needed a more precise definition. I defined conflict as 'the process which begins when one party perceives that another has frustrated, or is about to frustrate, some concern of his' (p. 891). This definition was broad enough to include a wide variety of conflict phenomena, but specified a beginning point for the conflict process — i.e. the point when other social processes (e.g. decision-making, discussion) 'switched over' into conflict.

Conflict handling modes

In the late 1960s, I first encountered *The Managerial Grid* (Blake and Mouton, 1964), which, among other aspects of managerial style, identified five different 'approaches to managing conflict'. These five approaches appeared to capture the basic choices available to conflicting parties better than simpler distinctions which were then being used in conflict research. As I wrote about them in the chapter, I attempted to separate these conflict approaches from the fixed managerial styles and the underlying values proposed by Blake and Mouton, and to isolate them into a taxonomy which would generalize beyond the superior–subordinate relationship.

A version of the taxonomy appears in Figure 1 (see Thomas and Kilmann (1978) and Thomas (1992) for a description of the ways that this taxonomy differs from the original Blake and Mouton). In this taxonomy, five conflict-handling modes (competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding and accommodating) are classified by the two underlying dimensions of assertiveness and cooperativeness.
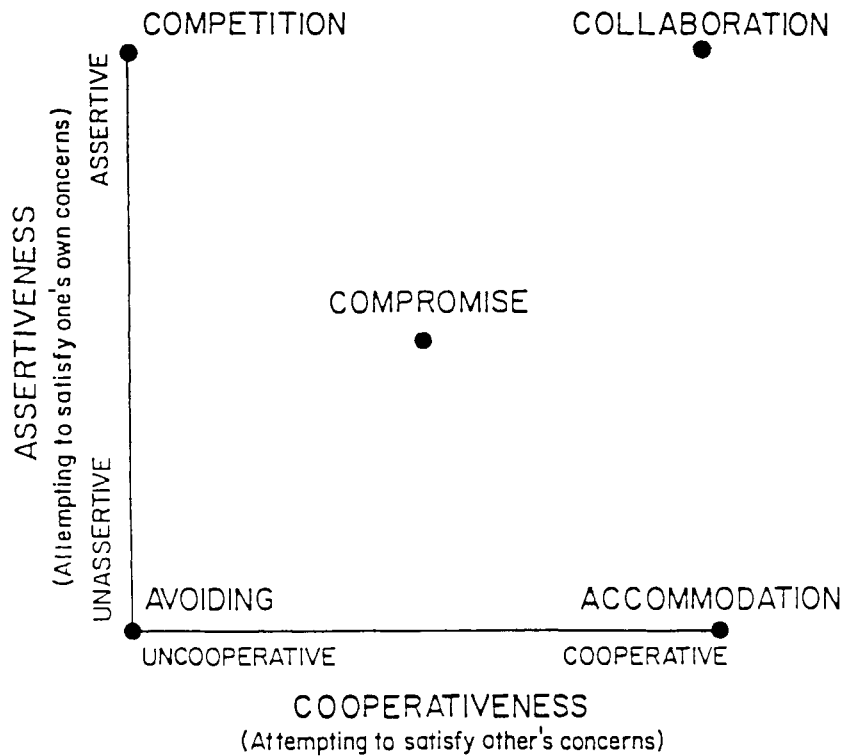

Figure 1. Two-dimensional taxonomy of conflict handling modes (adapted from Thomas and Kilman, 1974, p. 11). Copyright, Xicom, Inc. Adapted by permission

Process model

The conflict literature seemed overwhelming in its diversity until I hit upon the theoretical distinction between conflict *processes* and the *structure* in which that process occurs. The

process aspect of any system is the temporal sequence of events which occur as the system operates — e.g. the mental and behavioral activities of the conflicting parties; in contrast, the structural aspects of a system are the broader system 'parameters' — e.g. the more or less stable (slow-changing) conditions which shape or control the system's process. For example, norms, incentive structures and standardized procedures are some of a social system's structural features which shape its conflict process. In examining the process model, I drew heavily on Pondy's (1967) and Walton's (1969) basic outlines of the events or stages in a conflict episode. A basic sequence of events — frustration, conceptualization, behavior, outcome — was used as a skeleton for arranging specific conflict events and dynamics mentioned in the broader conflict literature. In particular, the process model provided a way of analyzing the mental and interpersonal events that lead to different conflict-handling modes and their consequences.

Looking back, I can see how the behavioral assumptions built into that model were significantly shaped by the societal events of the late 1960s and early 1970s. In two successive years, I had experienced a student strike at Harvard over the Vietnam War and a shutdown of the U.C.L.A. campus over the firing of black activist professor Angela Davis. My theorizing was clearly shaped by the ways that I experienced the campus debate over these issues. In particular, I stressed the role of cognition (or 'conceptualization') in shaping conflict behavior, since I experienced people seeing these conflicts in fundamentally different ways, and saw these perceptions clearly driving their actions and recommendations.

This cognitive perspective contrasted very strongly with the behaviorist perspective taken by the experimental social psychology literature at the time. The behaviorist perspective viewed conflict behavior as a direct, 'black box' response to objective characteristics of the other party's behavior or the situation. I was convinced that conflict behavior was shaped more directly by the parties' cognitive interpretations of these events — interpretations which were often limited and oversimplified as conflict intensified. Thus, my model tried to specify the forms of conceptualization used by parties in conflict, to show how these different types of conceptualization would encourage different conflict-handling modes, and thereby help to explain some of the dramatic conflict escalations I had seen on campuses.

Structural model

As noted above, the structural model dealt with the more stable *conditions* (or parameters) of a system which shape the conflict process — trying to identify a generic set of parameters which would encourage different conflict-handling modes in any setting. These parameters included characteristics of the conflicting parties (i.e. their internal structuring or personality) and characteristics of the context within which the parties interacted. The structural model was built upon variables derived from several studies of interdepartmental conflict (Thomas, Walton and Dutton, 1972; Walton, Dutton and Cafferty, 1969; Thomas, 1971). One of the objectives of this model was to capture the rich diversity of causal forces exerted on conflicting parties, in contrast to the simpler (often univariate) causal explanations common to the behaviorist and social psychological perspectives.

The structural model identified four different classes of variables: (a) *behavioral predispositions*, or the preferred 'styles' of the conflict parties, viewed as response hierarchies or habits; (b) *social pressures*, or normative forces on the conflict parties from two different kinds of stakeholder groups: 'constituents' whom a conflicting party might be representing, and 'ambient social pressure' from bystanders; (c) *incentive structures*, or the parties' 'stakes' in the conflict and the degree of 'conflict of interest' between the parties' differing concerns; (d) *rules and procedures*, or constraints upon the interaction process, such as decision rules, negotiating procedures or

procedures for mediating or arbitrating the dispute. The proportion (or 'mix') of conflict-handling modes in any given relationship was asserted to be shaped by the cumulative effects of all four classes of variables.

Conflict management

Although the chapter was titled 'Conflict and conflict management', the greater part of the chapter was devoted to descriptive conflict theory. This emphasis mirrored the descriptive, social science emphasis of my doctoral education. However, I did propose some basic fundamentals of conflict management: the complementary role of process and structural interventions, and some diagnostic questions to help practitioners identify key intervention targets. But given the chapter's focus on conflict-handling modes, the most applied section was a discussion of the functions and dysfunctions of different modes, in terms of the welfare of the conflict parties and the larger system in which they were members. The chapter emphasized the long-term benefits of collaboration, concluding that 'on the whole, collaboration is a desirable state of affairs' for individuals and organizations (p. 911). While this conclusion was based on a review of the empirical evidence on hand at the time, it was also consistent with the societal values of humanism and idealism of that historical period: the Kennedy era, the 'age of Aquarius' and the still-powerful human relations movement. My advocacy for collaboration was far more qualified than most people remember, however, and I identified further refinement of the 'relatively primitive and undifferentiated theory on this topic' as a top priority for further research (p. 929).

Developments since the 1976 *Handbook* chapter

A great deal has happened in the conflict literature since the original chapter was written — in my own work as well as in the broader literature. The remainder of this paper discusses the impact of the chapter upon that literature, and some changes in my own thinking. These changes can only be discussed briefly; more detail can be found in Thomas (in press).

Definition of conflict

There is still no generally accepted definition of 'conflict' in the literature. Rather, there seem to be two general approaches. (For a summary of other distinctions, see Lewicki, Weiss and Lewin, this issue). The first approach, following Schmidt and Kochan (1972), has focused more narrowly upon phenomena associated with competitive intentions, such as deliberate interference with the other's goals. This definition seems closer to popular usage of the term 'conflict', and is especially popular in the industrial relations literature (e.g. strikes and job actions). The second approach, following Pondy (1967) and the 1976 *Handbook* chapter, has been to adopt more general definitions which move 'upstream' in the conflict process to include events (usually a party's perceptions) which occur prior to the choice of conflict-handling modes. These definitions encompass a broader range of phenomena by allowing the conflict process to include 'branches' which involve conflict-handling modes other than competition. Thus, they appear to be more theoretically useful in capturing the range of choices available to conflict parties, by focusing not only on the choice but the determinants of that choice. As research on the conflict-handling modes has become more popular (see below), the number of theorists

adopting general definitions appears to be growing (e.g. Pruitt and Rubin, 1986; Putnam and Poole, 1987).

Thus, while more researchers have adopted general definitions, it does not appear that researchers have adopted the same definition proposed in the 1976 chapter; rather, as noted by Putnam and Poole (1987), there appears to be a family of general definitions involving the following three themes: interdependence between the parties (i.e. each has the potential to interfere with the other), perception of incompatibility among the parties' concerns, and some form of interaction. Although the groups of definitions are interrelated, different researchers have focused on different parts of these themes. While I find my own definition useful as a starting point for a conflict episode, there is clearly no consensus on a common definition.

Conflict-handling modes

A major success of the chapter was in legitimating the two-dimensional taxonomy of conflict-handling modes. There is now a sizeable literature on these modes; Putnam and Poole (1987) cite 40 such studies, and versions of Figure 1 now appear in many introductory textbooks. The two-dimensional model has been validated several times (see Ruble and Thomas, 1976; Prein, 1976; van De Vliert and Hordijk, 1986), and a number of psychometrically respectable instruments are now available to assess the five modes (Hall, 1969; Thomas and Kilmann, 1974, 1977; Rahim, 1983). Experimental paradigms have also been developed to study the conflict-handling modes in laboratory settings (Ruble and Cosier, 1982; Pruitt, 1983). Pruitt's work has been particularly helpful in disseminating the model into the social psychological literature.

Since the model was first proposed, I have recognized a need for refinements in the model (incorporated into Figure 1); although subtle, the refinements have significant substantive implications. First, researchers have *not* agreed as to exactly what the modes are: they have variously been interpreted as orientations, behaviors, strategies, and other constructs. I now believe they are best described as intentions — more precisely, the strategic intention of a party in conflict, what the party is attempting to accomplish in satisfying own and other's goals (see Thomas and Pondy (1977) and Thomas (in press) for more extensive discussions of this point). Accordingly, the dimensions of assertiveness and cooperativeness are now phrased in intentional terms, as *attempting* to satisfy own and other's concerns.

Second, I now emphasize that the two-dimensional model is purely a classification scheme or *taxonomy* of five conflict-handling intentions, classified according to two underlying dimensions of intent. Conversely, other versions of the two-dimensional model (e.g. Blake and Mouton, 1964; Pruitt, 1983; Rahim and Bonoma, 1979) have plotted the modes onto dimensions other than intentions (e.g. values or desires). This has the effect of making these alternative models more causal in nature, combining a taxonomy with causal modeling, and thus asserting that the two dimensions 'explain' or 'predict' the occurrence of the five modes. I find it important to separate the two for greater clarity, so that the causes of the modes can be investigated distinct from the dimensions themselves.

Process model

The process model seems to have had a modest impact; this event sequence model appears to have provided a useful organizing framework, and has been reproduced in a number of works. Some parts of the model have also received explicit testing; for example, Magula (1977)

found that the forms of conceptualization I discussed strongly influenced a party's choice of conflict-handling mode.

There is now a much greater appreciation of the role of cognition in shaping conflict behavior. For example, there is a greater emphasis on thinking about underlying interests rather than positions (Filley, 1975; Eiseman, 1978; Fisher and Ury, 1981). Neale and Bazerman (1991) have extensively studied the role of cognition in negotiator behavior. However, I am still concerned about researchers' assumptions about the kinds of cognition or reasoning which shape behavior. I believe these assumptions are strongly economic and rational in their orientation, and that there is a need to challenge and modify these assumptions. The new process model is built around the following elements: conflict awareness, thoughts and emotions, intentions, behavior and consequences. This model includes two major additions to rational/economic assumptions. The first involves *normative* reasoning. Here I have been strongly influenced by the work of Fishbein and Ajzen (1975; Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980). Their cognitive model states that intentions intervene between cognitive reasoning and overt behavior, and that there are *two* basic kinds of reasoning which shape intentions. The first is the familiar rational/instrumental reasoning, which is at the core of expectancy theory and most economic models, and suggests that individuals tend to pick acts which they perceive as likely to result in a desired outcome. However, individuals also engage in a form of normative reasoning, focusing upon doing the 'proper' (moral, ethical or fair) thing. Here, the emphasis is on the goodness of the act itself (as judged by social norms) rather than its consequences. Intentions, then, result from the combination of both factors, so that the cynicism or ruthlessness implied by the purely economic models is moderated by normative factors (Thomas, 1989). This addition is also consistent with the importance given in the current organizational literature to culture and notions of social justice. The second addition involves emotions. Psychologists have rediscovered emotion, after the heavy cognitivist emphasis of recent years (e.g. Shaver, 1984), and better understand its origins and effects. Accordingly, I have tried to integrate emotion into the conflict process, showing how emotions feed back onto both types of reasoning, and how they add additional motivational forces of their own in conflict episodes.

Conflict management

Theory in the area of conflict management has become much more extensive and sophisticated. Important developments in this area include Sheppard's (1984) framework for classifying the interventions of third parties into the conflict process, and more complex analysis of the goals of conflict management (e.g. Thomas, 1982; Sheppard, 1984). My own interests have also expanded to include the applied relevance (Thomas and Tymon, 1982) and usefulness of research (Kilmann, Slevin and Thomas, 1983). However, I wish to focus on the issue which was of central concern to the original chapter — the functionality of the different conflict-handling modes, and, consequently, which modes to encourage.

The new chapter develops the idea that the goals of conflict management (and thus the functionality of a given conflict-handling mode for meeting these criteria) depend on two independent dimensions — one's choice of beneficiary and of time frame. With respect to beneficiary, one can try to optimize the welfare of one of the parties (a *partisan* choice), both parties (a *joint-welfare* choice) or the larger system of which the parties are members (a *systemic* choice). Notice that the order here is a progression from narrower to more inclusive sets of interests. It is important to be aware that the consultant who is advising one party to a dispute has a very different (partisan) set of goals for conflict management than someone who is trying to serve both parties, or to meet the needs of the larger system. For the new chapter, I have

chosen to develop the systemic perspective. In cases of conflict within organizations, this usually means trying to manage conflict for the benefit of the organization itself.

The importance of the second dimension — the choice of time frame — became clear to me only after I found myself taking apparently contradictory positions on the value of collaboration. As noted above, the original chapter's emphasis on collaboration was consistent with the dominant view in the organizational literature at the time (see Lewicki, Weiss and Lewin, this issue). Collaboration (or 'problem-solving') was explicitly advocated by theorist/ researchers throughout the 1960s and 1970s, and into the 1980s (Blake and Mouton, 1964; Bennis, 1969; Filley, 1975; Likert and Likert, 1976; Eiseman, 1978; Fisher and Ury, 1981; Brown, 1983; Pruitt and Rubin, 1986). Their perspectives have been bolstered by a persuasive body of theory and empirical findings (cited in Thomas, in press) which indicate that collaboration can produce a number of superior conflict outcomes for individuals (e.g. satisfaction and self-esteem), for relationships (e.g. trust, respect and affection) and for organizational decision-making (e.g. more open exchange of information and more integrative decisions). Nevertheless, the 'collaborative ethic', as I later disparagingly termed it (Thomas, 1978), seemed to lose its dominance in the conflict literature as contingency views (by myself and others) emerged to challenge it (e.g. Rahim, 1983; Thomas, 1977; Thomas, Jamieson and Moore, 1978). At the risk of oversimplification, contingency views argued that collaboration is often naive and impractical, and that alternative modes should be advocated under different circumstances.

I now realize that these two perspectives — the 'collaborative ethic' and contingency theories — are answers to different questions involving long-term and short-term goals, respectively (see Table 1 for a comparison of these types of theories). Contingency theories in conflict management have tended to provide answers to the short-term question of how best to cope with current conditions. They are grounded in the reality of the current situation and are therefore relatively pragmatic in flavor. Adopting this short-term view, for example, one does not try collaboration if there are competitive incentives and procedures, if the parties have insufficient problem-solving skills, if time is too short, and if neither party trusts the other; instead, one may encourage competition or compromise. However, this very pragmatism necessarily restricts contingency theories to the search for a short-term, local optimum, and makes them in essence reactive to these conditions. To move beyond the limitations of present conditions requires addressing the longer term issue of how to improve conditions — i.e. to change the incentives (or procedures, skills, norms, time limitations, trust, etc.) that might move away from competition toward some alternative mode. It seems terribly important to recognize that trying to cope within some system of forces and constraints, while vital, is not the whole answer to conflict management. There is also the issue of trying to 'change the system' in some way — to change the structural variables that result in suboptimal processes and outcomes.

Theories which deal with improving conditions necessarily require some universalistic ideal or vision of excellence toward which to strive. In the conflict literature, as noted above, the ideal of intrasystem collaboration has tended to provide the long-term direction for organizational leadership and change. This type of theory has been labeled 'normative' (see Lewicki, Weiss and Lewin, this issue), perhaps because it specifies an explicit behavioral norm. Thus, theorists like Blake and Mouton (1964) and Likert and Likert (1976) advocated the long-term goal of enhancing collaboration through changes in organizational procedures, culture (including norms), members' skills, and other conditions.

Recognizing the distinction between the two time horizons in Table 1 makes it apparent that a synthesis is needed. Over time, successful conflict management seems to require that organizational leaders engage in both pragmatic coping and visionary improvement. The combination represents a kind of 'pragmatic idealism' which would seem to be very powerful.

Table 1. Comparison of short-term and longer term theories of conflict management

Properties of theory	Time horizon of the theory	
	Short-term	Longer term
Focus	Coping with the here and now	Building desirable futures
Context assumption	Contextual variables are given	Contextual variables are changeable
Goal	Local optimum: best achievable in present situation	Global optimum: excellence
Recommendations	What actions to take in present circumstances	What circumstances to create
Type of theory	Contingency theory	'Normative' (universalistic) theory
Flavor	Pragmatic/realistic	Idealistic/visionary

The structural model

Like the process model, the structural model seems to have had a modest impact. The general framework of the model can be seen in Katz and Kahn's (1978) description of the situational forces impinging upon conflicting parties in organizations. The 'incentive system' component of the model appears to have had some utility in its own right; Gladwin and Walter (1980) have used it to explain the relations between multi-national organizations and host countries.

Nevertheless, the new chapter's treatment of structural variables looks quite different, with many new variables and a different set of categories. In general, I have tried to do a more thorough job of integrating the major pieces of the chapter — process model, structural model, and conflict management — so the structural model builds upon the chapter's conclusions about long-term, systemic goals of conflict management, focusing on variables that can be changed over time to facilitate collaboration in an organization. Likewise, this model is linked more directly to the process model's assumptions about what factors shape conflict-handling intentions. The process model asserts that conflict intentions are determined jointly by rational-economic thinking, normative thinking and emotions. Therefore, the structural model sorts variables into three categories which serve the following functions: (1) providing collaborative incentives and feasibility conditions, (2) normatively endorsing collaboration, and (3) generating the emotional conditions (low threat, high support) which enable collaboration to be successful.

Conclusions

The primary goal of the 1976 *Handbook* chapter was to develop integrative, generic theory on 'conflict and conflict management'. The need for this sort of theory remains if the field is to have some degree of unity and cumulative learning. It seems most useful to view the chapter as a stage of development in the evolution of that theory. The chapter assembled a framework of constructs and descriptive theory, upon which other researchers have drawn for a wide variety of applications in different contexts. The basic underlying framework seems to have held up reasonably well over 20 or more years. However, a number of significant refinements, modifications and additions have proven necessary during the rewriting of the chapter, to incorporate new insights and developments from a rapidly growing literature, and

to focus on tentative answers to emergent questions. These changes can be interpreted as one author's view of the progress in a dynamic, changing field.

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