

Leadership

Connected Perceptions in Conflict

by AJ Powell 0 Comments 8 min read

Written by [AJ Powell](#)

The vast majority of conflict we see on a daily basis is that of *Individual Perception fed by Perspective*. What exactly does this mean? This means that people's individual perceptions about a situation have a tendency to be responsible for driving conflict due to common misconceptions based on their own individual perspectives. Let's face it, the warfighter communities are filled to the hilt with highly self-motivated individuals able to put their individualism to work within a team environment. They consistently do 4 things really, really, really well: They shoot, move, communicate, and are experts at becoming experts. This is true whether you're a current service member, veteran, or highly skilled civilian professional, the warfighter mentality is an existence driven by a team purpose, but fed by high degrees of individualistic internalized self-motivation. However, there is a drawback to the extremely close, competitive, family-like, tight-knit relationships warfighters develop within groups, and that is simple personality clashes. We eat, breath, sleep, sweat, listen, touch, taste, and live a **culture of success**. At the end of the day, we don't like to lose, and we are very competitive. Because of this, we often tend to create conflict within our own teams because we get caught up in seeing only one perspective – our own.

Inner-team conflict is nothing new, and a variety of current theories already exist that have tried to explain the many different types of conflict observed within groups and between group members. Morton Deutsch theorized that regular conflict within teams is driven by interdependence, Rummel created the Five Stage Model that describes the progression of conflict through a series of stages, and Roloff & Campion identified Reciprocity/Compensation in conflict created as a reacting response to the higher or lower levels of

perceived aggression from the other side. Now separately, each of these models identify sources of conflict from individual perspectives, however, in this short discussion, we will give you a bigger picture that shows how they are all, in fact, connected, and then further open discussion into how you can use this knowledge as a part of your own leadership, or simply within your everyday life.

Let's start by first defining these different theories, and follow by showing how all three theories are interwoven...

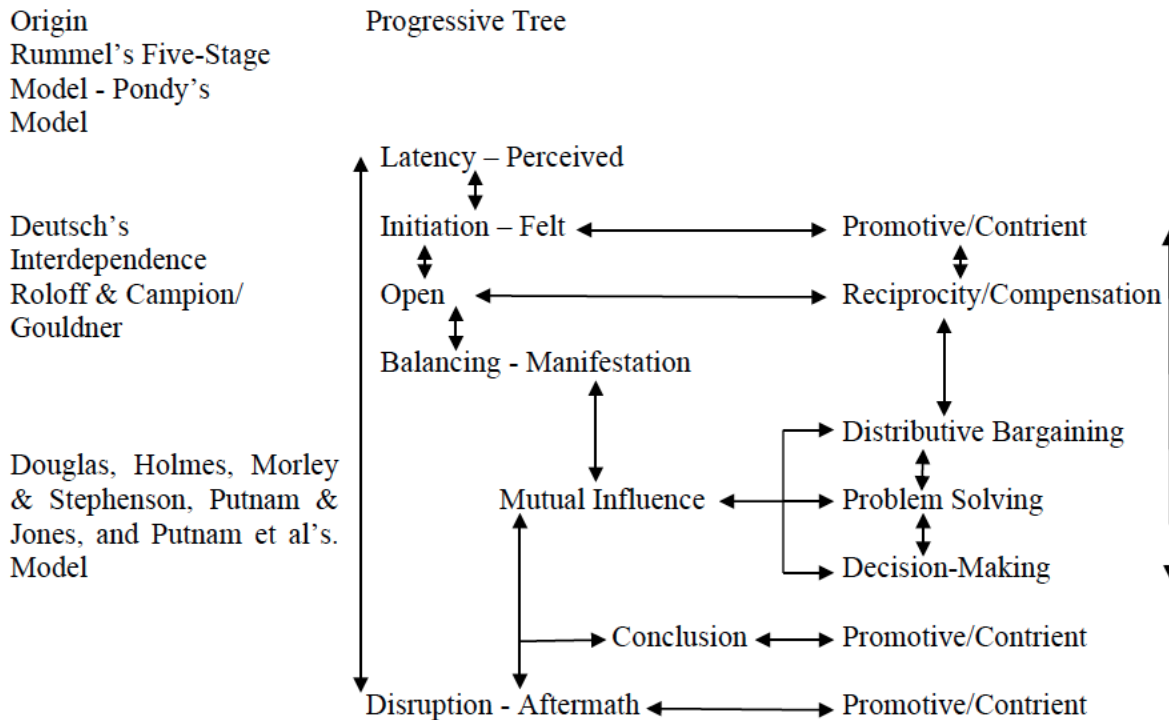
First, Deutsch. "Deutsch defined two basic types of interdependence: (1) *Promotive*, wherein the persons involved in the conflict perceive that gains by either one will promote gains by the other, while losses will promote losses; and (2) *Contrient*, wherein everyone perceives that one's gain will be the others loss." (Folger, et al, 2013, p. 80). Deutsch's theory suggests that both sides will share the same interdependence, and because we know that conflict is both unpredictable and dynamic in nature, we also know that both sides could hold similar perspectives as well as different ones at the same time. Additionally, each side will inherently sum up the conflict dependent on their own individually perceived differences based on how each feels the other will either cooperate or not. This is a continuously ongoing thought carried on in the background throughout the conflict's progression, and is both directly and indirectly responsible for that progression.

Next, Rummel's Five-Stage Model imagines conflict as a revolving door by which we continuously follow our own tails, reentering into the same conflicts over and over again, until, or unless, they are eventually completely resolved. Essentially, Rummel progresses the stages of conflict from Latency, to Initiation (Contact), Open (Direct Engagement), and Balancing (Resolution). It is at this point, where, should the conflict reach conclusion, it would end, yet if it does not, it enters into a new phase of Latency he calls Disruption (the realization by both sides that the conflict is not over). Furthermore, the differences between Rummel, Pondy and Putnam et al., are not actually all that different, as each is able to find a home within Rummel's overall model.

Lastly, Roloff & Campion, as well as Gouldner suggest a theory whereby a person's actions are also reactions based on adaptive responses enacted due to the behavior or actions of the other side. We see training in theories such as these in both military and law enforcement Escalation of Force models, and practical applications (in theory anyway) in military Rules of Engagement. These Reciprocity and Compensation type behaviors are reactive in nature, and prompted via an outside stimulant. Essentially, this too also plays a large – albeit more than likely subconscious – role in the conflict mitigation efforts of one or all parties involved. As each side feeds off the movements, conjectures, stances and process of the other(s), the conflict is changed, and its direction may change as a result.

Now, we stated that all three of these theories are actually smaller parts of a larger, interconnected whole. So to illustrate the relationship each one has in regard to the other, as well as to show just how they are all related, the following diagram has been constructed connecting the different stages of conflict progression within each of the theories just discussed.

The [Simplified] Big Picture of Internal Conflict Progression (Modeled by AJ Powell):



This Simplified Progressive Tree Model of the Big Picture of Internal Conflict Progression as mapped out by SSG AJ Powell (USA, Ret.) shows the interconnections of Rummel's Five-Stages of Conflict Progression. The arrows indicate the path of progression and the bridging of one stage to another, or the bridging across multiple stages. Double sidedness to the arrows indicates the possibility of advancement or regression from one stage to the next or to another. Finally, the model shows the relationships shared with Rummel's Five-Stages and both Deutsch's Interdependence Model and Douglas, Holmes, Morley, & Stephenson, Putnam & Jones' Model.

Now that it is easier to see the interactions, just how can we say that they are separate? In truth, they are actually all interconnected and one could easily create a much larger, encompassing theory to bring them all under one roof, just as the diagram above shows. As such, it would be easy to conceive that conflict resolution would be impossible on any level without all aspects of each theory remaining involved. We inherently move from one position to the next down the line, with each side marker working independently in the background, coercing the conflict and guiding it towards possible resolution or escalation, depending upon the individually held perceptions about the conflict (situation) as seen from each person's own individual perspective (bias).

So after establishing a basic understanding of this inner-group model of conflict, let's open discussions about how this might apply to the picture of our daily lives – and this is where you come in...

A big chunk of our everyday leadership responsibilities involves conflict management and resolution. As a leader of any team, you will consistently find that your abilities to drive productivity and maintain motivation are often tied directly to your ability to manage inter-group conflict. Therefore, it is essential to your success that you both maintain a basic understanding of conflict progression, as well as a basic ability to readily identify at what stage a conflict is in whenever you happen to come across a conflict in progress.

Inner-group conflict is a simple fact of life. It happens because of social and cultural friction compounded by the stressors of working towards a goal. The basic idea here is to provide you with a base-level understanding of the most common sources of conflict between group/team members, and show how each actually works together (not independently) as part of a greater whole. You will never be able to control conflict, nor will you ever be able to solve the source issues that spur it on in the first place, however,

knowing where a conflict is at in the progression model may ultimately aid you in guiding conflict towards resolution...

...And guiding others along the right path is what good leadership is all about.

Sound Off!

Critical Thinking Exercise:

Take a few moments to look at the Internal Conflict Progression Model again.

Given what you just learned regarding the definition of each of the three different theories used to make up the model, think about a single, common, everyday team conflict that you have come across in the past, then let us know what the event was, at what stage the conflict was in when you came across it, and see if you can describe the progression of the conflict through the different stages on the model (by following the arrows).

In the end, did the conflict reach a state of conclusion? Or did it enter back into a disruptive state?

If so, as a leader, let us know how you think you could have helped guide it towards a conclusion.

Post *YOUR* thoughts in the **Comments Below**. Open discussion helps everyone learn and grow.

References

Folger, Joseph P., Poole, Marshall Scott, and Stutman, Randall K. (2013). *Working Through Conflict: Strategies for Relationships, Groups, and Organizations*. Pearson Education, Inc.

Author's Note: It should be noted that this book (on p. 76) attempts to use "Iraq" as an example for the "revolving door theory", trying to relate the conflict of the First Gulf War to the events of 11SEP01. This is a false connection and should be ignored, as Iraq had absolutely nothing to do with the events of 11SEP01, and thus the proposition for its use in the "revolving door theory" is false.

Bias Conflict Conflict Management Deutsch Groups Leadership Leadership
Development Perception Perspective Roloff & Campion Rummel Team

About the author



AJ Powell

AJ is a retired U.S. Army NCO who served in both the U.S. Navy and U.S. Army. He is a combat veteran, and has participated in contingency operations around the world. AJ is the Owner of Veteran Leadership Solutions, the Founder and Editor in Chief of The Warfighter Journal, and is a published Sociological Analyst, Researcher, Guest Lecturer, and Public Speaker. He is a graduate of Pennsylvania State University with a focus on Sociology and a science degree in Organizational Leadership, and is published in the field of sociology. AJ is an inductive analyst; public figure; researcher/writer; aviator; a certified advanced operational diver; professional instructor, trainer, mentor, and adviser; snowboarder; motorcycle rider; world traveler; he enjoys long distance endurance events, and much more.