



Lecture 15: Conflict in Organizations

Learning Objectives

1. Describe the contemporary view of conflict, including the effects, types, and loci of conflict.
2. Explain each stage of the conflict process.
3. Outline the situations in which each of the five conflict-handling behaviors is most effective.
4. Identify some of the conflict management techniques managers use to address conflict.
5. Contrast distributive and integrative bargaining.

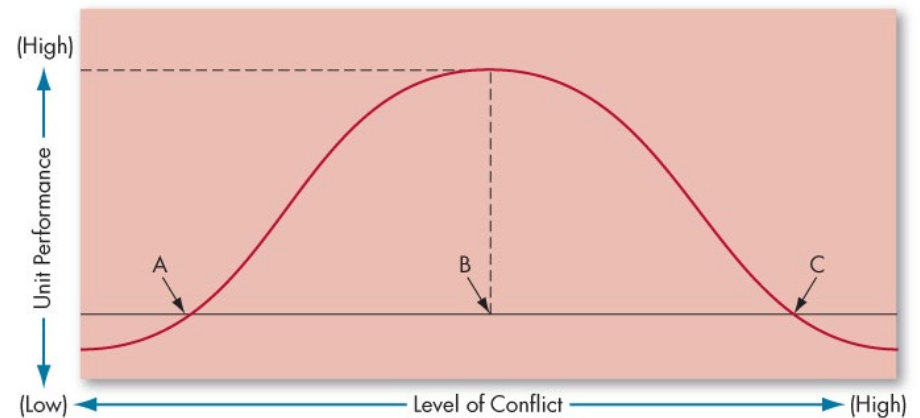
Conflict Defined

- **Conflict** is a process that begins when one party perceives that another party has (or is about to) negatively affected something the first party cares about.
- Contemporary perspectives differentiate conflict based on the effects, the type of disagreement, and the location.



Effects of Conflict

- Researchers study the effects of conflict.
- **Dysfunctional conflict** undermines the group's goals and hinders its performance.
- **Functional conflict** supports the group's goals and improves its performance.



Situation	Level of Conflict	Type of Conflict	Unit's Internal Characteristics	Unit Performance Outcome
A	Low or none	Dysfunctional	Apathetic Stagnant Nonresponsive to change Lack of new ideas	Low
B	Optimal	Functional	Viable Self-critical Innovative	High
C	High	Dysfunctional	Disruptive Chaotic Uncooperative	Low

Types of Disagreement

- Researchers also study the type of disagreement at the center of the conflict.
 - **Task conflict** is related to disagreements about the content and goals of the work.
 - **Relationship conflict** is related to disagreements about how people work with one another.
 - **Process conflict** is related to disagreements about how the work gets done.

Types of Disagreement

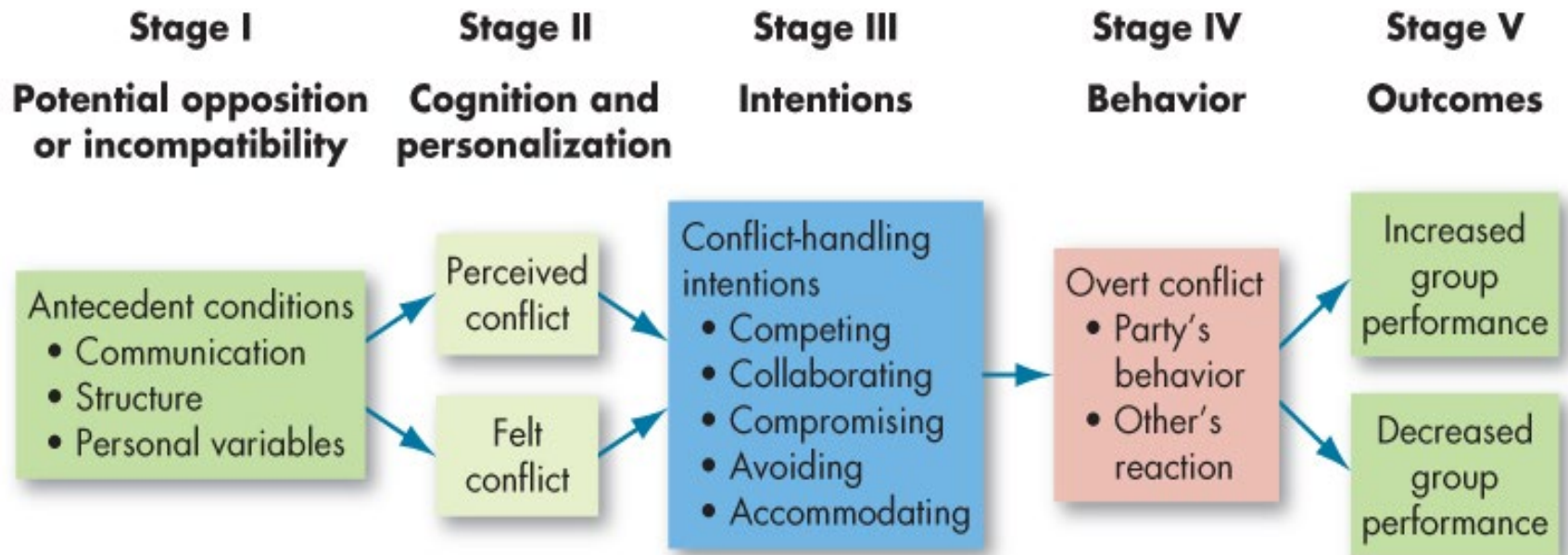
- The experts agree that relationship conflict is usually dysfunctional.
 - It can increase personality clashes, decrease mutual understanding, and be psychologically exhausting.
- The experts disagree whether task conflicts and process conflicts are functional or dysfunctional.
 - Some studies suggest low to moderate levels can be beneficial, while other studies fail to find a relationship between these types of conflict and group performance.

Location of Conflict

- Conflict can also be understood in terms of its location or the people involved in it.
 - **Dyadic conflict** occurs between two people.
 - **Intragroup conflict** occurs *within* a group or team.
 - **Intergroup conflict** occurs *between* two or more groups or teams.

Stages of the Conflict Process

- The **conflict process** has five stages.



Stage 1 – Potential Opposition or Incompatibility

- The first stage involves the emergence of the conditions that create opportunities for conflict to arise.
- These conditions include communication, structure, and personal variables.
- If the conditions related to these variables negatively affect one party, then the potential for conflict becomes actualized in the second stage.

Stage 1 – Potential Opposition or Incompatibility

Communication conditions include variables such as differing word connotations, jargon, insufficient exchange of information, and noise in the communication channel.

Structural conditions includes variables such as group size, degree of task specialization, jurisdictional clarity, member-goal compatibility, leadership styles, reward systems, and the degree of dependence between groups.

Personal conditions includes variables such as the individual value systems that each person has and the personality characteristics that account for individual differences.

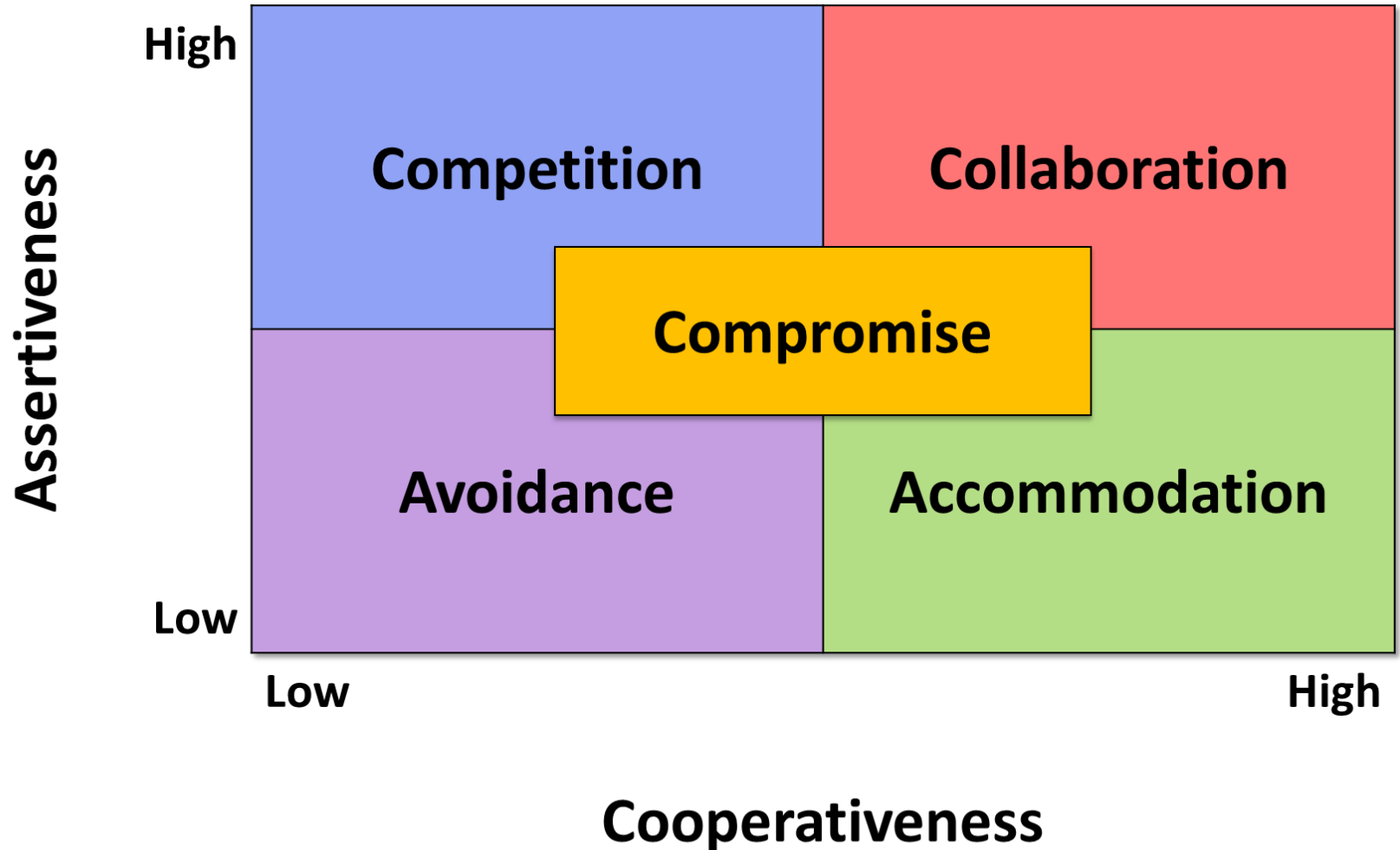
Stage 2 – Cognition and Personalization

- In the second stage, conflict is actualized.
 - The conflict must be **perceived** (one or more parties are aware of it) and **felt** (one or more parties are emotionally involved in it).
- This stage also involves one or more parties defining the conflict and decide what the conflict is about.
 - Emotions play a major role in shaping perceptions and therefore our reactions to the conflict.

Stage 3 – Intentions

- The third stage involves **intentions**, which are decisions to act in a given way.
- There are five conflict-handling intentions that are organized along two dimensions:
 - **Cooperativeness**, which is the degree to which one party attempts to satisfy the other party's concerns.
 - **Assertiveness**, which is the degree to which one party attempts to satisfy their own concerns.

Stage 3 – Intentions



Stage 3 – Intentions

- **Competing** is the intention to satisfy one's own interests regardless of the impact on the other parties.
- **Avoiding** is the intention to withdraw from or suppress conflict.
- **Accommodating** is the intention to sacrifice one's own interests to satisfy an opponent's interests.
- **Compromising** is the intention to accept a solution that only partially satisfies both parties' interests.
- **Collaborating** is the intention to work with the other party to find solutions that satisfy both parties' interests.

Stage 3 – Intentions

- Intentions are important to the conflict process because:
 - They intervene between our perceptions and emotions and our overt behavior.
 - One party must infer the other party's intent to know how to respond to the other party's behavior.
 - They are eventually translated into behavior, but the behavior doesn't always match the original intentions.



Stage 4 – Behavior

- During the fourth stage, conflict becomes visible, and intentions are translated into comparable behavior.
- It includes the statements, actions, and reactions made by the conflicting parties, usually as overt attempts to implement their own intentions.
- The five conflict-handling intentions translate into five comparable conflict-handling behaviors.
- **Conflict management** techniques are used to resolve dysfunctional conflict and stimulate functional conflict.

Conflict Management Techniques

Problem solving	Meeting face-to-face to identify the problem and resolve it through open discussion.
Superordinate goals	Creating a shared goal that can only be attained if the conflicting parties cooperate.
Expansion of resources	Expanding the supply of a scarce resource.
Communication	Using ambiguous or threatening messages to increase conflict levels.
Smoothing	Emphasizing common interests and deemphasizing differences between the conflicting parties.
Bringing in outsiders	Adding employees to a group whose backgrounds, values, attitudes, or managerial styles differ from those of the present members.
Authoritative command	Using formal authority to resolve the conflict and communicate directives.
Altering the human variable	Using behavioral change techniques to alter attitudes and behaviors that cause conflict.
Altering the structural variables	Changing the formal organization structure and the interaction patterns of conflicting parties.
Restructuring the organization	Realigning work groups, altering rules and regulations, increasing interdependence, and making similar structural changes to disrupt the status quo.
Appointing a devil's advocate	Designating a critic to purposely argue against the majority positions.

Stage 5 – Outcomes

- The fifth stage involves the outcomes of the action-reaction interplay between the conflicting parties.
- Conflict is constructive when it improves decision quality, stimulates creativity, provides the medium through which problems can be aired and tensions released, and fosters an environment of self-evaluation and positive change.
- Conflict is destructive when it breeds discontent, reduces group effectiveness, and threatens the group's survival.

Negotiation Defined

- **Negotiation** is a process that occurs when two or more parties reach an agreement to allocate resources.
- We measure the success of this process by evaluating:
 - The agreement itself.
 - The satisfaction of all the parties involved.
 - Its ethical compliance.
 - Its impact on the relationship(s) between the parties.



Distributive vs. Integrative Bargaining

- **Distributive bargaining** seeks to divide up a fixed amount of resources and create a win-lose situation.
 - Each party tries to get as much of the pie as possible by focusing on their positions and not sharing information with the other party.
 - It can reduce the parties' satisfaction because it tends to be confrontational and focused on the short term.
 - It can be used when the relationship between parties is of no concern.

Distributive vs. Integrative Bargaining

- **Integrative bargaining** seeks to expand the pie and reach a win-win solution that satisfies all parties.
 - Both parties are focused on their interests and the long term and share information with the other party.
 - It can provide outcomes that build lasting relationships.
 - It is usually preferable to distributive bargaining.



Distributive vs. Integrative Bargaining

Characteristic	Distributive Bargaining	Integrative Bargaining
Goal	Get as much of the pie as possible	Expand the pie so that both parties are satisfied
Motivation	Win–lose	Win–win
Focus	Positions	Interests
Interests	Opposed	Congruent
Information Sharing	Low	High
Duration of Relationship	Short term	Long term

Distributive vs. Integrative Bargaining

- Seek integrative solutions when you want to:
 - Learn something about the other party.
 - Merge insights from people with different perspectives.
 - Gain commitment by incorporating concerns.
 - Work through feelings that interfere with a relationship.
 - Maintain a positive working relationship with the other party.



Implications for Managers

- Understanding functional and dysfunctional conflict requires that we identify the type of conflict and where it occurs.
- To assess conflict, consider its antecedents (structure, communication, and personal variables); people's perceptions and personalization of the conflict; their conflict-handling intentions and behaviors; and its constructive or destructive outcomes.
- For integrative bargaining to succeed in an organization, opposing parties must be open with information, focused on interests, and sensitive to the relationship between parties.