

Understanding Constructive & Destructive Conflict¹

Characteristics of Constructive & Destructive Conflict

Conflict is not automatically a *bad* thing. Constructive processing of differences can produce high quality decisions, encourage growth and strengthen groups/individuals. Destructive conflict can result in poor quality decisions, discourage learning and cause ongoing harm to groups/individuals.

Some characteristics of the 2 extremes are:

Constructive Conflict	Destructive Conflict
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Affirms differences and sees their potential for enriching outcomes. ▪ Participatory - <i>win/win</i>; shared power; focused on group/common interest; safe. ▪ Attitude of curiosity, genuineness, humility & respect. (Reflected through listening, questioning, validation, affirmation, empathy, a <i>power with</i> approach & openness.) ▪ A 2-way process - trying to achieve mutually acceptable outcomes; broad vision; open to change; focus on the issues; rational. ▪ Based on clear guidelines/ground rules/process. ▪ Equal information - sharing common information base; naming personal agendas; seeking fair outcomes. ▪ High level of personal responsibility for process; balance between <i>giving</i> and <i>taking</i>. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Uses differences as divisions - dichotomous (<i>wrong/right; bad/good; weak/strong</i>). ▪ Competitive - <i>win/lose</i>; powerful/powerless; focused on self interest; scary. ▪ Attitude of confrontation, dominance & aggression/passive-aggression. (Reflected through dumping, <i>put downs</i>, talking over, hurting, abuse, violence, blaming and taking <i>power over</i> others.) ▪ A 1-way process - trying to win preferred outcomes; narrow vision; resistant to change; personalises issues; irrational. ▪ Out of control - no guidelines/limits. ▪ Uneven/unequal information - work from stereotypes/assumptions rather than information; undercurrents/hidden agendas; disinterested in fair outcomes. ▪ Little or no personal responsibility for process; <i>winner takes all!</i>

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Behavioural Indicators of Constructive & Destructive Conflict

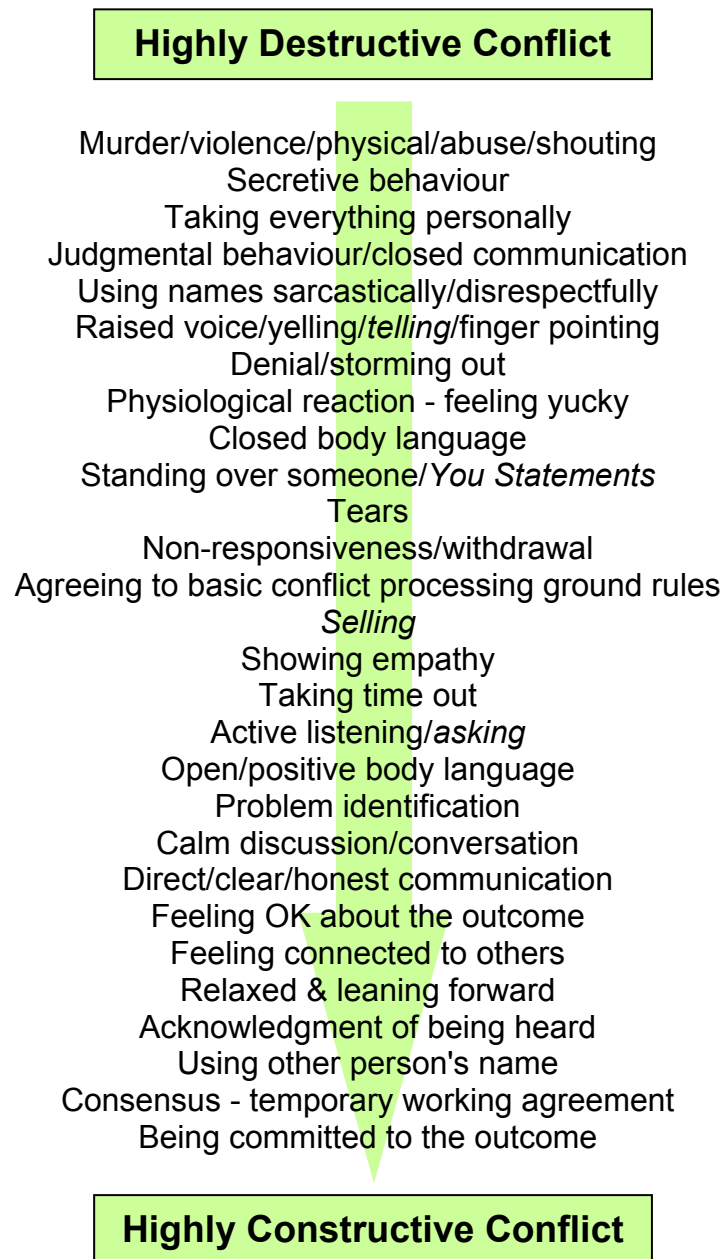


Diagram 1 - A Continuum of Behavioural Responses to Conflict

Possible Causes of a Commitment to Destructive Conflict

As a facilitator, or participant, it is easy to react to others' unproductive behaviour in a blaming way and assume that they are being deliberately destructive. In fact, there are

a wide range of reasons why someone might commit to destructive conflict - in general, or in a specific situation:

- Power struggle - a belief that they can *win* a particular issue which is important to them or seeing *success* as a threat to their position.
- No alternative - lack of skills/awareness of alternative ways of processing disagreement (reflex action/conditioned response/learned behaviour).
- Lack of empathy with others/inability to see issue from others' point of view.
- Feeling of hopelessness - a belief that how they act doesn't matter; low self-esteem.
- Anxiety about risks associated with moving out of their *comfort zone*; fear of change.
- Ideological reasons - belief that competition is good; defending an ideology/values they are committed to; opposition to the ideology/values being used.
- Advance knowledge about the issue - a pre-existing assumption of significantly different interests in the group.
- Personal vulnerability or invulnerability - feeling threatened; unwilling to look at their own behaviour.

These are well summarised by De Bono's idea² of the four key factors in conflict - fear, force, fairness and funds. A few favourite *one-liners*:

Fear is always about the future³.

Force is used to start conflict, to energize them and to end them⁴.

*The sense of what is **fair** (and just, and right) is central to civilization⁵.*

*The cost of most conflict very quickly escalates beyond the point at which the conflict makes sense to either side. **Cost** should be the **major determinant** of the feasibility of a conflict⁶.*

Judging the Nature of a Conflict

It is important (whether you are a facilitator, or aim to be a productive participant) to assess the level of constructiveness/ destructiveness in an actual or emerging conflict. This assessment allows you to challenge destructive behaviours, or reinforce/support constructive behaviours.

Some questions that can be helpful in judging the nature of a conflict are:

² de Bono, Edward (1985), **Conflicts: A Better Way to Resolve Them**, Penguin Books, London.

³ *ibid*:144

⁴ *ibid*:148

⁵ *ibid*:153

⁶ *ibid*:157

Wider Context

1. Are there indicators of hidden agendas? (Individual? Organisational? Situational? Social? Economic? Cultural?)
2. What's the situation/context/timing?
3. How does it fit with the history of interactions?
4. What is the source of conflict? (Values/ideological? Resource based? Internal? External? Within/outside the control of the group/individuals?)
5. Is the conflict about the issue named, or something else?

Group Context

6. Is the problem clearly identified and acknowledged as a problem?
7. Are all the players equally informed? ... At both a content and process level?
8. Is there a demonstrated commitment to agreed outcome(s)? Do participants **want** to process the conflict?
9. Is it possible to revisit/review outcomes?

Participant Behaviour

10. What does participants' body language indicate? Are you making cultural/personal assumptions about this?
11. What does participants' tone/volume of voice indicate? Are you making cultural/personal assumptions about this?
12. What does participants' vocabulary/style of words indicate?
13. Are lines of communication open?
14. What's the level of engagement of participants?
15. Is there acknowledgment of being heard?

Personal Reflection

16. What is your intuition/instinct/emotional response? What does your personal comfort level say about the situation?
17. What's your *baggage*? Do you have a personal agenda/investment?

Don't whip yourself if you don't get it *right* ... you have 17¹⁷ chance (ie. 1: 527,240,261,886,336,764,177) of judging all 17 criteria (and probably more) *correctly*!

Strategies for Moving Conflict Forward

Highly Destructive Conflict

- Be prepared to be some **time** into addressing this situation
- Forget the past if it is irrelevant to this particular issue
- Demonstrate listening and hearing
- Know yourself and self-identify your values
- Maintain a positive outlook
- Work toward a temporary working agreement
- Show open mindedness/genuineness
- Acknowledge power differences and work toward weakening their negative affects
- Ask open-ended questions/mediation
- Give opinions or suggest alternatives
- Create outlets for frustration
- Acknowledge, identify, name and define the problem
- Develop strategies for addressing the problem
- Have a degree of detachment - don't take matters personally
- Ensure your personal agendas are *up front*
- Assess (individual and group) incentives for mutual outcome or change
- Demonstrate reflective listening/attitude of respect
- Name your judgments about the conflict
- Be prepared to compromise *non-core* issues
- Table **all** the available information
- Demonstrate positive reinforcement and warmth toward those who disagree
- Use positive language and provide constructive feedback
- Take a risk by trying something different yourself
- Be honest, direct and centred
- Be forgiving - demonstrate that it is OK to make mistakes
- Identify your baggage ... and leave it at home!
- Demonstrate your commitment to achieving effective outcomes despite outcome
- Encourage review of progress and outcomes - *in situ* and after
- Work from the assumption - There is no *real truth* ... others' ideas are *worth a try!*

Highly Constructive Conflict

Diagram 2 - A Continuum of Possible Interventions to Improve Conflict Processing