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## [Introduction to] Leading Through Conflict: Into the Fray

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# Leading Through Conflict Into the Fray

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## *Introduction*

DEJUN TONY KONG AND DONELSON R. FORSYTH

Humans, for the most part, are a peaceful species. *Homo sapiens* work collaboratively with others under most circumstances, frequently putting others' needs ahead of their own. Yet, the same species that so often seeks out and offers support, help, and acceptance can suddenly turn against others. Normally friendly colleagues disagree about project goals and end up exchanging harsh words. Families argue over finances, rules, and responsibilities. Struggling work teams search for a person who can be blamed for their inefficiency. Leaders, while believing that they have the full support of their followers, find that no one stands behind them when they share their vision for the future. Conflict disrupts the normal, routine course of events and can be sparked by what seems to be the most minor of disagreements, misunderstandings, or uncertainties. But, whatever the cause of the initial disunity, conflict can grow as persuasion gives way to argument, emotions take the place of logic, and the once tranquil interaction or relationship is transformed into one rife with anger, hostility, and even violence. When two or more parties experience conflict, they leave everyday routines behind and "enter the fray."

### **The Analysis of Conflict**

Much is known about the many factors that trigger conflict. As social conflict theory suggests, social systems are dynamic—continually in flux—and in many cases changes in one sector of the system result in stresses and strains that surface in the form of conflict. Although in

rare instances, individuals, groups, organizations, and societies may avoid all conflict because their multiple elements are perfectly coordinated, the push and pull of interpersonal forces usually exerts its influence. Conflict, then, has its roots in differences of opinion, competition for scarce resources, interpersonal enmity, confusion about goals, disagreements, and the like—any disruption that creates a lack of alignment can trigger the conflict cycle. The conflict intensifies and the group that was once unified splits into factions. Eventually the conflict peaks and does not dissipate until the parties seek and implement a way to resolve their differences.

This book contributes to this analysis both conceptually and methodologically. First, the chapters develop novel theoretical frameworks that offer alternative perspectives on the causes and consequences of conflict. All of the experts who contributed chapters to this work draw on previous analyses of conflict, as they recognize that conflict is the result of both personal and interpersonal processes that disrupt the normal course of cooperative social intercourse. Each author, however, digs deeper into conflict processes by examining potential causes of conflict that have been summarily investigated or, in some cases, entirely overlooked. Second, the authors, rather than rely on a narrow set of research methods in their work, use a range of empirical procedures in their investigations, including case studies, narrative review, meta-analyses, experimentation, and correlational analyses. The result is a richly textured analysis of the causes of conflict and their possible resolution. Third, the chapters, taken in combination, provide a multilevel, interdisciplinary perspective on conflict. The authors who contributed to this work include scholars and researchers from a variety of disciplines—social and personality psychology, sociology, leadership studies, and organizational behavior—and so do not favor a specific level of analysis when examining conflict. In their quest to understand why conflict occurs and how it can be resolved, these chapters consider a full array of micro-, meso-, and macro-level variables, including the qualities, characteristics, and actions of the individuals; group- and organizational-level qualities such as cohesiveness, composition, and structure; and macro-level factors that operate in communities, cultures, and countries. This multilevel framework guided our ordering of the chapters, to a degree. The arrangement of the chapters we selected is somewhat arbitrary, but moves from psychological analyses that focus primarily on the individual, to group and intra-organizational settings, and eventually to intergroup and community-level conflicts.

### Personal Conflict

Conflict, in many cases, is about individuals—their personal qualities, their traits, or just the way they routinely interact with others. Ask a person why they do not get along with someone at work, in their team, or in their organization, and in many cases they will blame the other person's negative personal qualities, such as moodiness, compulsivity, incompetence, communication difficulties, or personality characteristics. Dan Jones, in his chapter titled "Moral Conflicts and Dark Resolutions," traces interpersonal conflict back to one primary source: the grating interpersonal tendencies of individuals who adopt a less pro-social and more self-serving agenda when interacting with other people. These individuals are Machiavellians, for they express a cynical view of human nature and possess a moral outlook that places expediency above principle. Like the other two elements of the dark triad—psychopathy and narcissism—Machiavellianism is associated with an exploitative style that, when discovered, can result in conflict. Unlike psychopaths, who may harm others just to observe the results, Machiavellians are ever strategic—their choices are designed to maximize their outcomes, even if others must pay the costs. Jones's analysis uniquely stresses the capacity of the Machiavellian to use normative moral principles and expectations to exploit others. His moral manipulation theory argues Machiavellians are skilled at invoking other's sacred moral values, and then using those values to rationalize the choices they prefer.

Dejun Tony Kong and Sarah Drew examine a second set of psychological forces—the emotions—in their chapter, "Meta-Analyzing the Differential Effects of Emotions on Disengagement from Unethical Behavior: An Asymmetric Self-Regulation Model." Conflict, as they note, tends to covary with strong, negative emotions. Most people, when asked about a time when they found themselves involved in a conflict with another person or group, usually mention the emotions that they experienced: anger, fear, hostility, irritation, and the like. Kong and his colleagues, recognizing the close association between conflict and these negative emotions, suggest that these emotions are not merely side effects of the conflict process, but they play a significant role in increasing or quelling conflict. Their asymmetric self-regulation model maintains that emotional valence (positive versus negative emotions) and activation (activated versus deactivated emotions) jointly determine individuals' disengagement from conflict-provoking behaviors—specifically those that are recognized as morally suspect. In a meta-analytic review they

found that positive emotions such as happiness/joy and excitement help individuals disengage from unethical behavior whereas activated negative emotions such as anger/hostility, fear/anxiety, and guilt preclude individuals from disengaging from unethical behavior.

### Intragroup Conflict

When conflict occurs in a team or a group, the actions or beliefs of one or more members of the group are unacceptable to and resisted by one or more of the other group members. Members stand against rather than in support of each other. Whereas groups and teams, by their very nature, require interdependency, cooperation, and mutual assistance, allies turn into adversaries when a group experiences conflict.

Erica Foldy and Tamara Buckley, in their chapter titled “Permeable Borders: How Understanding Conflict in Research Teams Can Enhance Understanding Conflict in Work Teams,” examine the complex relationship between group diversity and conflict. They begin with their detailed study of a number of teams working in a child-welfare agency that struggled to avoid the so-called color bind: the tendency to avoid speaking of issues pertaining to race and culture. Groups often resist speaking openly about race and other sources of diversity since discussing those topics can lead to conflict as members must work to counter take-for-granted assumptions about status and life experiences. Some of the groups they investigated, which they describe in their book *The Color Bind: Talking (and not Talking) about Race at Work*, were often willing to experience periods of conflict in order to bring issues of race and culture out into the open. Some groups, however, were both color and conflict evasive: These groups appeared free of conflict, yet they actively resisted any talk of race and its influence on those they served. Foldy and Buckley, however, also take their analysis to a second level: They explore their own research group, looking (and finding) evidence of the same sorts of processes that groups use to avoid conflict, particularly when dealing with issues of diversity. Team members’ differences, they realized, were influencing how they were interpreting the teams they were observing, prompting very different interpretations of data and different emotional reactions to observed occurrences. Their case study sheds light on issues of conflict, team diversity, and the effects of ignoring one’s own perspective on race and status.

Just as Foldy and Buckley, experts in the analysis of conflict and diversity, nonetheless experienced conflict within their research group

and sought its source, Jean Bartunek and Sara Rynes also found themselves in conflict while coordinating work on an extended, and difficult, writing project. Their chapter, "Scholarly Conflict in Practice," describes how these two colleagues and friends decided to work together on a paper for a scholarly publication, but soon ran into a series of problems that eventually resulted in conflict within the group. Their analysis provides a case study of not only a group that experienced conflict, but also one that was able to work its way through the period of conflict to a successful result. In reflecting upon their experience, they drew upon team conflict theory and research (e.g., task, relationship, and process conflict) and explained how task and process conflict could escalate into relationship conflict. As they noted, most studies examine intragroup conflict in a constrained setting, neglecting such conflict in daily experience. Their work, like that of Foldy and Buckley, did not make use of traditional methods, such as experimentation or survey, but instead employed case study and personal reflection. These methods are more common in ethnography, grounded theory, hermeneutics, critical and phenomenological approaches to science, but when applied by skilled researchers they provide insights into the dynamics of intragroup conflict.

### Intraorganizational Conflict

Conflict is not merely an individual- or group-level process, but also an organization-level process. A multilevel perspective on social behavior recognizes that individuals, groups, and teams are nested in larger collectives, including organizations and associations, so conflict can spread quickly from one locus within the organization to the entire organization. An initial disagreement may involve only two individuals, but as conflicts intensify, previously neutral individuals, groups, and units may be drawn into the fray. Michele Williams suggests in her chapter, "Thinking About You: Perspective Taking, Perceived Restraint, and Performance," that conflict in organizations is so likely that individuals must, through self-regulation, actively avoid being drawn into, and further intensifying, conflict. Her work focuses on a less-examined foundation of interpersonal cooperation—restraint, which she defines as individuals' willingness to refrain from harmful behaviors toward others. Restraint is important for reducing interpersonal conflict and maintaining positive relationships with others. Drawing upon symbolic interaction theory in sociology as well as

communication and psychological research on perspective taking, she investigated the mediating role of restraint in the relationship between perspective taking and work performance. She notes the implications of her findings; specifically, restraint is critical for reducing destructive conflict, precluding conflict escalation, and ultimately promoting organizational effectiveness.

Inga Carboni and Tiziana Casciaro also examine the way conflict can reverberate through social networks within an organization. Their chapter, "Love Me or Hate Me: Exploring Controversial Sociometric Status," approaches organizations as social networks, where individuals are linked to one another in a complex web of communication, attraction, status, and dependency relationships. Previous network analyses have examined how different types of network configurations can promote and inhibit cooperation and conflict, and how individuals who occupy different positions in the network can moderate conflict's consequences. Individuals who are, for example, "populars" or "stars" in a social network are more influential, both in terms of promoting cooperation and conflict, than those "rejected" or "isolated." Carboni and Casciaro extend that work, creatively, by identifying an additional network type: the controversial. These individuals are both disproportionately liked and disproportionately disliked relative to other members. Their analysis reveals that these controversial individuals have the lowest level of work performance, even lower than those who are consistently disliked, presumably because controversial individuals have to manage various social ties, which can be mentally and emotionally exhausting. Their findings suggest that positive and negative social ties need to be considered jointly for a better understanding of intraorganizational conflict.

In small organizations where members interact face-to-face on a regular basis, naturally emerging social structures are based on networks of likes, dislikes, influence, and so on. But in larger organizations, social structures are often more hierarchical and compartmentalized, particularly when the organizations occupy multiple geographic locations. Such a network structure tends to create subgroups within it, and the divisions between these subgroups can eventually become faultlines: divisions that separate the members of a heterogeneous group into smaller, more homogeneous, subgroups. In her chapter, "Building Organizational Capability of Distributed Global Teams: Strong Subgroups Without Active Faultlines," Sirkka Jarvenpaa explores virtual conflict between two cultural groups—one located in the US (onshore) and one located in India (offshore)—in a global service organization. Drawing upon



subgroup and faultline theory and research, she examines how leadership can resolve the tension between the benefits of knowledge-based subgroups and the downsides of identity-based subgroups, focusing on the dynamics of conflict between the onshore and offshore groups across cultures.

### Intergroup Conflict

Groups, teams, and organizations, as adaptive, collaborative social systems, provide the means to achieve humanity's most lofty goals, but when one collective finds itself in opposition to a second collective, that is a source of hostility, abuse, and aggression. Earlier chapters examined the causes of and possible cures for conflict between two or more individuals or within a group or organization. However, conflict also occurs between groups, and is known as intergroup conflict.

Susan Opatow, a social psychologist who studies social justice, examines a tragic case of conflict in her chapter, "Protest and Policing: Conflict, Justice, and History in Ferguson, Missouri." On August 9, 2014, a police officer in the town of Ferguson, Missouri, confronted and fatally shot an unarmed African American named Michael Brown. Opatow expertly describes the incident and the ensuing conflict that resulted, examining local and national media reactions, the actions of law enforcement organizations, and community response. Using Ferguson as a case of intergroup conflict, her analysis draws on previous studies of the sources of racial tension in the United States to conclude that systematic dispossession and structural violence (as contrasted with direct violence) created a divide between the residents of Ferguson and the community's police force. These processes, Opatow suggests, resulted in a narrowing of the concept of justice. A wide, inclusive sense of justice encourages respectful, egalitarian relationships between groups, for all are considered worthy of fair treatment. A narrowing of the scope of justice, in contrast, results in moral exclusion as the members of other groups come to be viewed as undeserving. When conflict occurs and justice shifts from inclusive to exclusive, laws, rules, and norms that are ordinarily protective are not applied equally for all individuals. Methodologically, Opatow's work makes a strong case for studying conflict *in situ*: in the organizations and communities where tensions are rife and conflict resolution is needed.

The book's final chapter provides a distinctly optimistic resolution to our analysis of conflict; it focuses not on the causes and consequences

of conflict, but on one proven method for resolving conflict: forgiveness. Everett Worthington, Brandon Griffin, and Caroline Lavelock, in "Forgiveness, Conflict, and Societal Change," consider forgiveness as key to reconciliation at various levels. Forgiveness undoes the damaging effects of conflict by reversing the upward spiraling cycle of repeated retaliation following real or perceived injury. Retaliation requires one party to impose sanctions on another, but revenge is risky. It can destroy the social relationship between the wrongdoer and the retaliator and can also provoke counter-retaliatory actions. Forgiveness, which is inherently associated with humility and can be fostered through interventions, promotes individual/public health, relationship repair, and intergroup cooperation. These authors, drawing on their decades-long program of research on forgiveness, offer a multilevel view on forgiveness that suggests that this positive interpersonal and psychological process not only helps resolve interpersonal conflict, but also helps resolve intergroup conflict, such as conflict between communities and even societies.

### Conflict and Its Resolution

In one way or another, conflicts subside. Even when members are committed to their own viewpoints, high levels of tension cannot be maintained indefinitely. Disputants may regain control of their tempers and break the upward conflict spiral. The group may fissure, splitting into two or more subgroups whose members are more compatible. One member may leave the group to find another place where he or she will try to find acceptance. In time, hostility abates.

Conflict is ubiquitous, but is it also always pernicious—a negative interpersonal process that causes only harm? This question remains open to debate, but it may be that the problem is not conflict, but mismanaged conflict. As the chapters in this book make clear, many relationships, groups, teams, organizations, and communities pass through periods of conflict. In some cases, this conflict yields mostly negative, harmful consequences. But in some cases this conflict phase—once resolved in a positive way—expands the range of options, generates new alternatives, and enhances organizational unity by making explicit any latent hostility and tension. A group or organization without conflict may be working so perfectly that no one can identify areas for improvement, but more likely, it is a group ignoring problems that may eventually bear negative repercussions.

We end, then, with a charge to all individuals: All must take responsibility for understanding the sources of conflict, recognizing conflict when it rises within their organizations, and taking steps to resolve it—or, at least, manage it. People should not try to sidestep or ignore conflict and the many factors that this book identifies as possible causes of conflict, but rather they should confront conflict, understand it, and ultimately resolve it.