

# Myths, Causes and Sources of **CONFLICT**

## Learn to Recognize and Appreciate Them!

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**T**wo co-workers are quarreling over the use of the office copy machine. A participant in one of your programs is upset with the activity leader and calls you to file a formal complaint. The same activity leader has filed a complaint against the program participant for sexual harassment. The maintenance supervisor is at odds with the program supervisor over the extended use and alleged misuse of one of your recreational facilities. One of your employees has a “personality conflict” with another employee. The local Sierra Club is upset with the manner in which your organization “fails to protect and manage valuable natural resources”. You need help this weekend with an unscheduled special event and no one wants to give up his or her holiday to supervise the program.

Does any of this sound familiar? The answer is probably yes, because each of these scenarios is an example of a conflict situation that could easily surface in any leisure service organization. The first step in managing and resolving conflict is to learn to appreciate and understand the myths surrounding conflict and to recognize the causes and potential sources of conflict.

### Recognizing Conflict

Conflict is as natural as the rising of the sun and the setting of the moon. It is an inevitable ingredient of existence as we know it and an accepted consequence of people working and living together. Conflict exists whenever people are in disagreement and opposition. In fact, conflict is so prevalent in the work place, it is estimated that managers of organizations spend approximately 40% of their time refereeing conflict!

Unfortunately, when most individuals think of conflict they tend to focus on ideas and concepts that are negative and destructive. For example, we often associate the words *stressed, angry, irritable, frazzled, furious, enraged or infuriated* when speaking of individuals involved in conflict. We think of conflict producing loss of jobs, inefficiency, broken relationships, violence, and uncomfortable situations. People therefore often tend to avoid and shun conflict in order to escape the perceived consequences of conflict.

The truth of the pudding is that conflict is actually neither good nor bad. Conflict is not something that is a tangible product, but it lies in the minds

of the individuals who are parties to it. As such, the real “meaning” of conflict is defined in how conflict is managed and its eventual resolution.

The Chinese symbol for conflict is a product of two words: *Danger* and *Opportunity*. What we do with conflict—that is to say how we manage it—once conflict enters our lives, determines which of these two words to apply to each distinct conflict situation. For example, conflict can be a destructive force, a *danger* if:

- X no decision is reached and the problem still exists once the conflict arises;
- X the conflict diverts energy from more important activities or issues;
- X the conflict destroys the morale of groups or individuals; or
- X the conflict polarizes or divides groups or individuals.

On the other hand, conflict can be a constructive force, an *opportunity*, if:

- X people change and grow personally from the conflict;

- X the conflict results in a solution to a problem or problems;
- X the conflict increases the involvement of everyone affected by the situation; or
- X the conflict builds cohesiveness among the members of a group or individuals themselves.

Viewed as an opportunity, conflict can provide several constructive consequences. Conflict can:

- ✓ identify problems and the need for solutions;
- ✓ promote change as individuals work to resolve their problems;
- ✓ bring people together as the group or individuals seek to deal with areas of concern; and
- ✓ stimulate new ideas and creativity (O'Morrow and Carter, 1997).

Conflict represents nothing more than disagreements, misinterpretations, dissimilarities, controversies, misunderstandings, prejudices, incompatibilities, and intolerances. It occurs when there exists a set of divergent aims, methods or behaviors.

Conflict is found in unresolved differences. It is sometimes marked by behaviors designed to destroy, injure, thwart, eliminate or otherwise control another individual or group. Conflict even exists as a state of external and/or internal tension that results when two or more demands are made on a

solitary individual, group or organization. Conflict can exist solely within a single individual or as interpersonal conflict involving two or more separate individuals. There can exist conflict between an individual and a group or it can exist as inter-group conflict involving two or more collections of individuals. Finally, there can be conflict between two or more organizations.

### Conflict "Myths"

To truly comprehend, grasp and manage conflict, it is necessary to be cognizant of several myths that exist regarding conflict. The existence of these myths forces most individuals, particularly in a professional setting, to function under misunderstandings and prejudiced perspectives. Acceptance of and belief in these myths by most individuals hampers constructive and positive conflict management and resolution. The business desk reference (1993) identifies five myths about conflict.

**Myth #1:** The presence of conflict is a sign of poor management.

Do not accept this myth. Remember, we have already established that conflict is inevitable and a natural consequence of individuals living and working together. Organizational management should not be judged based upon whether or not conflict exists within the organization. It should be judged based upon how the conflict is managed and resolved.

The strength of an organization can actually be shown through the ability of its management and leadership to handle conflict in positive ways and to accentuate the constructive aspects of conflict. Successful managers and organizations anticipate the existence and inevitability of conflict, contend with conflict when it does evolve, and enjoy the absence of conflict when feasible.

**Myth #2:** Conflict is a sign of low concern for the individual or organization.

This too is fictitious — if anything, the opposite is the reality. If this "myth" were true, each one of us is guilty of expending enormous amounts of time, money and energy involved in something that means very little to us: conflict. The reality is that we typically involve ourselves in things that denote a great deal to us and for which we have a high regard and concern. With this in mind, it is more prudent to state that conflict signifies not a low concern, but an indisputable concern for something.

**Myth #3:** Anger is negative and destructive.

Anger is a valid human emotion. And, like conflict, anger is neither good nor bad, positive nor negative. Often times our anger is vented and manifested through conflict. However, this venting of our anger does not have to be unhealthy or damaging. If we are allowed to find expression for our anger appropriately through the suitable management of the conflict situation, it can lead eventually

to a more satisfactory resolution of conflict itself.

**Myth #4:** Conflict, if left alone, will take care of itself.

There are some elements of truth to this statement, and avoiding is an appropriate and suitable conflict management strategy and technique. However, one must not believe that avoiding is the only conflict management strategy and technique, or that it is the opposite tact to initiate when first attempting to resolve conflict. Avoiding is just one of several conflict management strategies and techniques and, as we will see, it has optimal and most appropriate times and circumstances to be utilized.

**Myth #5:** Conflict must be resolved.

As pointed out earlier, there are both destructive and constructive potential outcomes of conflict. Conflict, if resolved too quickly, may not provide all of the constructive elements that it is capable of producing. For example, quick resolution of conflict can stifle creativity, ingenuity and originality by not allowing the participants in the conflict to “work out their

differences” in the most appropriate and effective manner. Focusing too intently on a solution to the conflict may cause one to lose perspective and lead to single-objective thinking — quick conflict resolution — thereby limiting options and outcomes.

### **Causes and Sources of Conflict**

Beyond an understanding of the myths surrounding conflict, it is important for leisure service professionals involved in the management and resolution of conflict situations to also comprehend the potential causes and sources of conflict. The causes and sources of conflict are numerous and are found in an individual’s values, attitudes, expectations, perceptions, personalities and needs whenever these factors are dissimilar to or in contrast with those of other individuals. It often occurs because we as individuals use different and various sources of information to guide and direct our lives and decisions. Conflict can also arise over competition for scarce resources, which can force people to “battle” for control of or access to these resources in order to survive or exist.

source of conflict lies in the tremendous diversity of people populating the world today. Organizations and communities around the world are no longer homogeneous in nature. In fact, they are quite heterogeneous. Such significant diversity greatly influences the possibility for conflict through the misunderstanding and misinterpretation of cultural and ethnic differences and uniqueness.

Disparate values, attitudes, expectations, perceptions, personalities and needs coupled with the diversity among the world’s peoples can also produce different personal, group and organizational objectives. The pursuit of these dissimilar objectives can in itself frequently lead to conflict. In short, the causes and sources of conflict **exist everywhere and anywhere!**

Another cause or potential

Conflict management and resolution is a complex and difficult process facing every leisure service manager.

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