

The Causes of Conflict

While conflicts reflect differences between people, the causes of these differences can exist at more than one level. Any conflict is therefore likely to involve several layers. As a result, different sorts of disagreements and sources of conflict are superimposed on each other, making conflict difficult to analyse and pin down. We can distinguish between five different layers of conflict:

Misunderstandings

These happen by accident and arise from misconceptions about what is said or intended. Once recognised, they can normally be sorted out fairly easily. Take care that they do not conceal deeper differences.

Differences in values and beliefs

People have their own values and principles, and differences can lead to disagreements about organisational objectives or decisions. Differences in values are personal in origin, but may also arise from structural divisions (between head office and the branches/regions for example) or from informal groupings (such as age).

Organisations that have undergone mergers or acquisitions can be faced with differences between the beliefs of their staff that persist for many years.

Differences of interest and ambition

Groups and individuals have different interests and ambitions, which result in competition for the limited power, status and resources within organisations. This competition can lead to conflict.

Interpersonal differences

For all kinds of reasons, some people have difficulty in working with others, because of personality, temperament or style. Where this leads to a personality clash, conflict can arise.

Feelings and emotions

People's feelings and emotions are also closely intertwined in conflict. We are not always aware of, or may deny, how strongly we feel about things. Rather than admit the strength of our feelings, we talk about 'the principle of the matter'. Conflict itself can arouse strong emotions that lead to further conflict. Once emotions are aroused, it is easy to lose a sense of proportion about the matter in hand, and the conflict can escalate.

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