

Navigating Conflict

ABOUT CONFLICT MANAGEMENT SERVICES AT UND

The University of North Dakota partners with Emily Holth, professional conflict management consultant, to provide conflict management services to UND faculty, students and staff.

As members of a university community, people are encouraged to express themselves freely and there are times when that expression leads to conflict. Holth, founder and owner of Sustainable Solutions, a Grand Forks firm specializing in workplace mediation, coaching and team development, provides people with a confidential service where they can feel safe in speaking about difficult situations, complaints or inquiries. Holth and her firm Sustainable Solutions are independent from UND and can therefore offer neutral guidance to those seeking advice on how to manage through conflict.

- **Consider contacting Emily at Sustainable Solutions if you:**
- need an independent, impartial and confidential person to listen
- prefer to make an informal inquiry about an issue, rather than ask through formal channels
- seek guidance on interpreting a situation, policy or procedure
- feel treated unfairly
- encounter a problem that requires an outside party to help facilitate a constructive conversation

Through this partnership, members of the UND community have access to world-class conflict management services. Emily is available for appointments both on and off-campus.

Learn more about us by contacting us at:

www.sustainablesolutionsgf.com

Phone 701-261-6805 Email: emily@sustainablesolutionsgf.com

WHAT IS CONFLICT?

Understanding what conflict is and how it affects people. Our conflicts do not come in neat packages with the causes, issues, feelings, needs, or decisions clearly labeled so the other people can respond to them. Conflict is messy and makes us feel uncomfortable. It alters our sense of who we are and our perception of others. No one likes conflict, but gaining comfort with conflict can make you a more confident and competent in your interactions with others.

Based on your experience with conflict, please answer the following questions:

What comes to your mind immediately when you hear “conflict”?
(picture/images/words)

What did you learn about conflict in your family and from your culture? What metaphors, adages, stories do you recall?

On a scale of 1-10, with one low and 10 high: 1-----5-----10

- What is your comfort level with your own conflict?

- What is your comfort level with other people’s conflict?



HOMEOSTASIS



Homeostasis, a key concept in biology, refers to the body's maintenance of a consistent internal environment. In order to maintain this balance, the body automatically regulates many of our life processes. Homeostatic mechanisms are needed to control many functions, including our blood, oxygen, temperature, weight, and water.

Everyone has a homeostasis; however, the words, experiences, attributes, and values that define harmony or balance in our lives are unique to each of us. In our interactions with other people, we also establish a collective or shared homeostasis. For example, a person brings his/her homeostasis to a marriage, which in turn is shaped by his/her spouse. They maintain their individual homeostasis, but they are also a part of a shared homeostasis with each other. Employees bring their homeostasis to work, and their homeostasis is part of a larger collective, corporate homeostasis. **When we are in our homeostasis we typically feel: calm, motivated, organized, clear, capable, efficient, in control, confident, helpful, and empathic.**

Use your homeostasis as the barometer for how you are feeling and thinking during the day. It will help you to "tune in" to your emotions and use them to positively guide your thoughts and behaviors in the workplace.

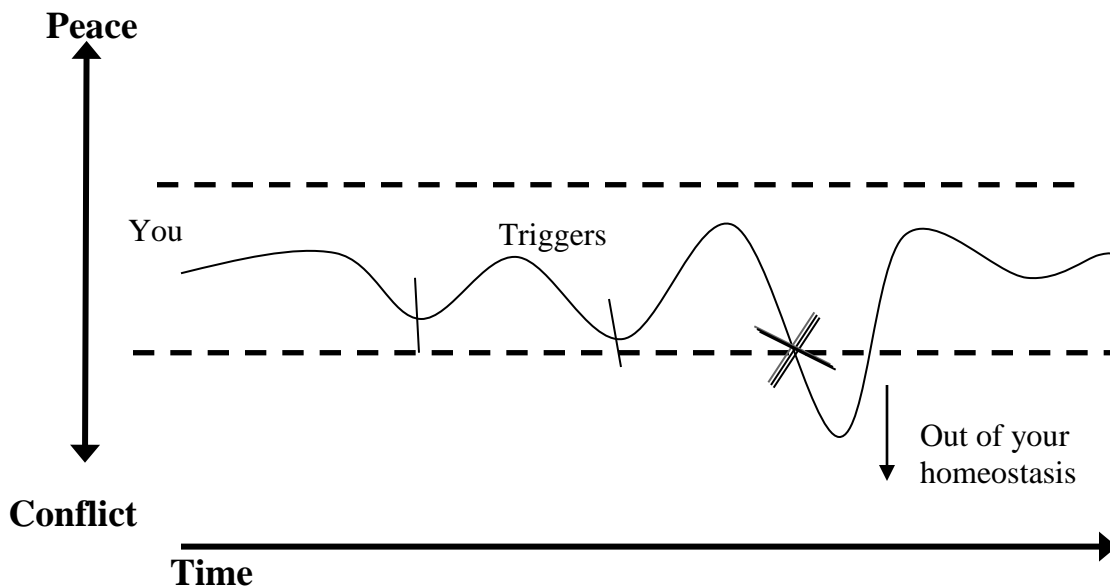
<u>Describe YOUR Homeostasis</u>	<u>Your Workplace:</u>

Conflict can take us out of our homeostasis, disrupting our comfort zone and our balance between peace and conflict.

Walter Cannon, who was the first person to discover the stress response, believes that it is this strain on the body that causes us to experience stress and come out of our homeostasis. In order to regain our balance or equilibrium we may need to increase positive activities (e.g., sleep, exercise, diet) or decrease negative activities (e.g., reduce stress or stop smoking) in order to get our body back within our predetermined set points.

Similar to our physical body's attempt to stay in homeostasis, we believe that we have a mental and emotional homeostasis. That homeostasis is our ability to maintain a balance between peace and conflict. It's our comfort zone where we are best able to live out our beliefs and values.

So, how does this relate to conflict? When we experience conflict (e.g., a difficult conversation) it upsets our balance. We typically can handle stress within reasonable limits, but similar to our body's reaction to an injury or illness, conflict can take us out of our homeostasis. Many of us avoid difficult conversations because they could cause conflict and this conflict disrupts our balance. **When we are out of our homeostasis we typically feel: uncertain, unsure of what to do, not in control, frustrated, angry, least able to listen and take the perspective of another person, self-absorbed, least able to problem solve and least able to live out our values.**



WHY IS CONFLICT HARD?

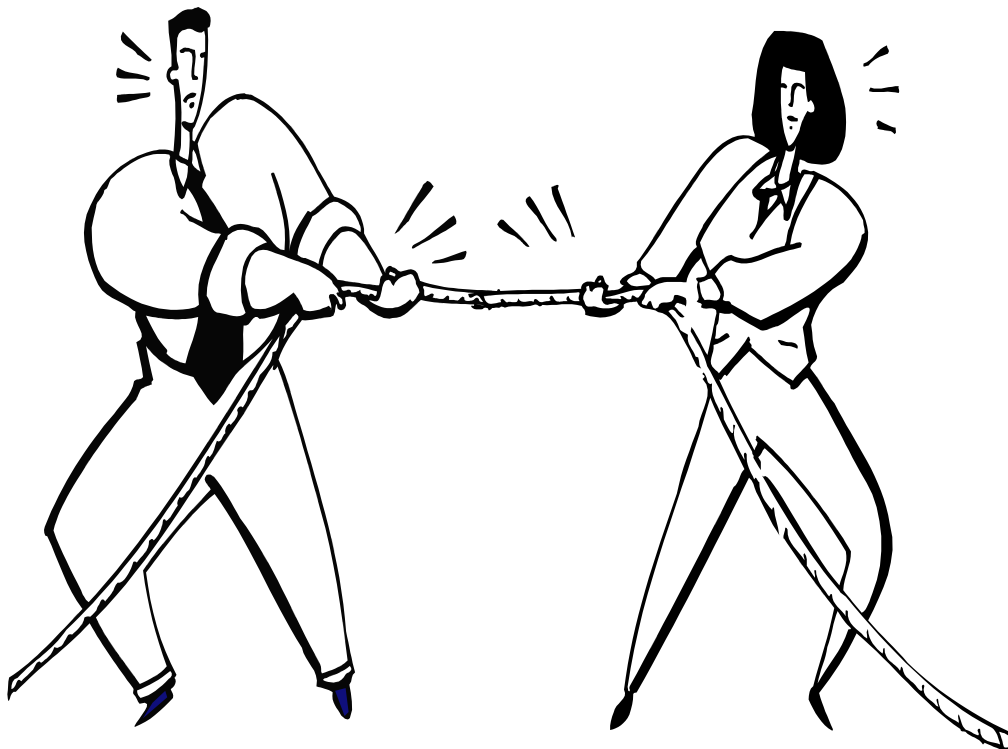
UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCE OF CONFLICT

I. Think of a recent conflict that you were involved in. As you replay your conflict experience, describe YOUR **behavior, feelings, thoughts, and physical symptoms** while in the moment of conflict:

(For example, I felt enraged, powerless, tense...)

II. Now, describe the OTHER person in the conflict. How did you perceive their **behavior**? Describe their **emotions**. Describe their **physical** symptoms of conflict.

(For example, he/she was mean, uncaring, insensitive, unreasonable...)



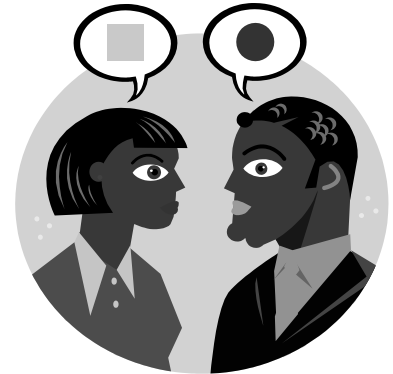
UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCE OF CONFLICT

How does conflict impact you? We all experience conflict in much the same way. It is a universal experience that makes us all feel weak, frustrated, confused, angry, suspicious, defensive, and/or emotional (Bush & Folger, 1994). In conflict, our ability to think clearly, make good decisions, feel confident or capable, and/or feel in control of ourselves is diminished.

How does conflict impact the way you view others? Typically, conflict has a destructive impact on our relationships. It can cause us to view others in a negative way. When we feel this way we are least able to see or value another person's perspective (Bush & Folger, 1994).

When we are **in conflict**, we typically feel...

- Unsure of what to do
- Incapable of managing our problems
- Unaware of the resources we could use to help us
- Less able to live out our values
- *Not in control of our lives!*
- Least able to access whatever problem solving skills we may have
- Least able to listen to, understand, or take the perspective of another person



On the other hand, when we are not in conflict and things are going well, we think clearly, feel stronger, confident, and are more capable of handling multiple tasks and managing our lives.

When we are **not in conflict** we typically feel...

Here's the conflict paradox:

When you are feeling bad (i.e., hurt, angry, tense, powerless, frustrated) and thinking the other person is a jerk, remember the other person is also feeling bad and thinking you're a jerk.

- Confident of the decisions we make
- Capable of managing our problems
- In touch with the resources we can use
- Able to live out our values
- *In control of our lives!*
- Sure of our problem-solving skills
- Capable of understanding the perspective of others

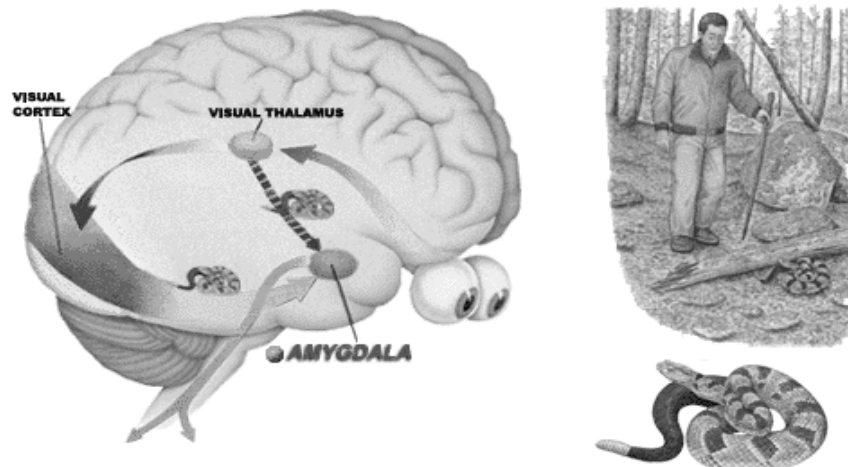
WHY DO WE EXPERIENCE CONFLICT THIS WAY?

Innate Physiological Responses

When we experience conflict, our bodies automatically respond to the stress. This stress-related condition is triggered by the amygdala and is commonly referred to as the “fight, flight, or fright” response.

This is how it works:

- 1) When we get startled, our senses send signals throughout our brain. Auditory and visual stimuli are processed first by the thalamus, which breaks down incoming auditory cues by volume and dissonance, and visual cues by size, shape, and color (Gorman, 2002). The thalamus then sends this information to the amygdala (i.e., emotional brain) and the cortex (i.e., thinking brain). Once the amygdala receives the information it attaches emotional significance to it and immediately sends the equivalent of an all-points bulletin to alert other brain structures. This alert triggers your body to respond with “fight, flight, or fright.” While all of this is going on, the cortex is making sense of the raw sights and sounds sent by the thalamus. This allows us to have a precise description of what we were hearing and seeing *after* our body has responded.
- 2) Olfactory (smells) and tactile (touch) stimuli bypass the thalamus and go directly to the amygdala (Gorman, 2002). The amygdala attaches emotional significance to what we have smelled or touched and



triggers a response of “fight, flight, or fright.” Our responses to these stimuli are slightly stronger and quicker because only our “emotional brain” has processed them. After we have responded with “fight, flight, or fright” the cortex begins to decipher what we smelled or touched so we can make sense of what we were responding to.

Our brain is structured to allow the amygdala to respond *before* our thinking brain has had an opportunity to make sense of the stimuli. However, there is a down side to this immediate response—**it is not very precise**. Since it is such a quick and often inaccurate response, we tend to feel confused or “stupid” during the most intense moments of conflict. The amygdala may keep us from stepping in front of a bus or falling off the edge of a cliff, but in the moment of conflict we often feel stymied because we cannot think clearly or respond quickly enough to someone’s verbal assault. We may also experience physical symptoms such as, increased heart rate, loss of peripheral vision and hearing, headaches, muscle tension, fatigue, aggression, and increased perspiration. Long-term, constant conflict may result in high blood pressure, ulcers, and other long-term illness.

Emotional Override

The amygdala plays an integral role in how we experience conflict. Even after we begin to calm down the amygdala remains on high alert. We may begin to feel more at ease, but the residual effects of the conflict still remain. This lingering physical tension can actually trigger the amygdala again and cause us to think about other conflicts.

Why does this happen?

Because our brain assesses the conflict so quickly (i.e., amygdala response) there is not enough time to become consciously aware of how we should feel about it (Sapolsky, 2003). During this state of uncertainty, our brain tries to figure out what we are experiencing by canvassing our body to see how it’s reacting to the outside stimulus. Since our body is feeling tense our brain thinks there must be something we are upset about, so it begins to search our memory for upsetting things that could be responsible for these feelings (Sapolsky, 2003). We begin to remember and replay other conflicts, which really have nothing to do with the conflict at hand. As we think about the conflict we begin to flood ourselves with other issues and our amygdala takes control of our emotions again. What was really just one incident turns into many as our emotions take over (i.e., emotional override). If this conflict goes unresolved, the snowballing and flooding continue until we feel overwhelmed again.

Critical Conflict Replay

As we think about our conflict, we typically replay the situation and our conversations over and over again, sometimes changing the words, the

emotions, or the responses. Again, the amygdala has a role in how we process these thoughts and emotions.

Why does this happen?

The amygdala works with the hippocampus to formulate our memories. The amygdala retains the *emotional* flavor of our memories, while the hippocampus remembers the *dry facts*. For example, the hippocampus is responsible for recognizing the face of a co-worker, but it is the amygdala that reminds you that you don't like her—the hippocampus retrieves the information and the amygdala determines if it has any emotional significance. So, when we see the person we are in conflict with the amygdala and hippocampus go to work and provide us with a vivid emotional memory. This emotional memory is triggered many times as we replay the conflict in our mind. Critical conflict replay is not always a pleasant experience, but this phenomenon might actually *help* us manage our conflict more effectively. As we replay the conflict, it helps us to think through our responses and gain some clarity about our situation. Over time it may also help us work through our problem, as we weigh the pros and cons of possible solutions.

The Pity Party

When we experience conflict most of us find someone who will feel sorry for us and agree with everything we have to say—someone who will throw us a pity party. The pity party serves an important function, by helping us become more clear and calm. Most people come away from this party with a feeling of having more control, feeling listened to, feeling supported, and yet knowing, at least a little, that they too are partially to blame for the conflict. Once the pity party has served its purpose, we may begin to seek out those individuals who will give us good, honest advice, whether we like it or not. These individuals don't always agree with us, but they do help us build self-awareness as well as recognition for others.

Playing the “Trigger Card”

As mentioned above, the amygdala and hippocampus work together to provide us with vivid emotional memories when we get into or think about conflict. This emotional memory is triggered many times as we replay the conflict in our mind. If we experience a similar conflict in the future, we are more likely to assume the new conflict relates, even if it does not. We tend to attribute the worst intentions to those people we have had conflict with in the past. Our brain connects the current conflict with a negative emotional memory, and we quickly assume that the two issues are related. This kind of attribution leads to making accusations and assumptions, which may keep us from finding the “real” reason behind someone's behavior.

TRIGGERS: HOW DO THEY IMPACT CONFLICT?

Triggers are those stressors or hot buttons that can cause conflict in your life. They can be situations or people that create stress, despite your best efforts. Different things trigger different people, but most of us are triggered by our unmet needs and expectations or threats to our core identity and what we want to believe about ourselves and others. We often attribute the worst intentions to others when they push our buttons.

Why do we get triggered?

- 1) What are my triggers, irritations, or buttons that get pushed?

- 2) Circle the 3 hardest triggers above. When someone pushes each button, what do you assume about their intentions?
 - a)

 - b)

 - c)

- 3) What needs do I have that is not met when this happens? (e.g., safety, belonging, fun, order, contribution, esteem, connection, etc.)
 - a)

 - b)

 - c)

- 4) How do I know when I have been triggered?

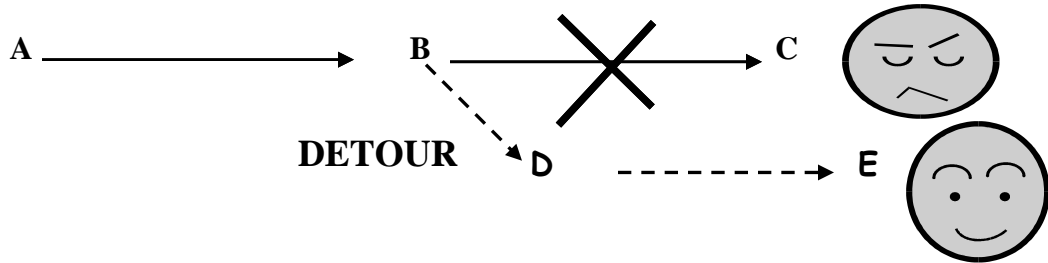
- 5) How do I trigger others?



Once we become aware of our triggers we can start to lessen or eliminate them and manage our conflicts more effectively.

I AM TRIGGERED...NOW WHAT??

CHALLENGING YOUR THOUGHTS



A is the activating event (stressor) that sets you off.

B is your belief or thought about the situation.

C are the emotional or behavioral consequences of the stress.

D is the detour around your old beliefs that you could choose

E is the evolution of more positive and constructive thoughts and behaviors

Choose one of the triggers you listed on the previous page that you seem to have the hardest time with, or that creates the most stress for you:

Trigger: _____

Your Thought: _____

Unmet Needs: _____

Learn to Detour Around Your Old Thoughts About That Trigger:

Questions to Consider:

- ◆ Could there be other reasons for what happened?
- ◆ What could be going on for the other person?
- ◆ What will happen if I continue to think or act like this?
- ◆ Does it benefit me to think like this about the trigger?
- ◆ Do I downplay or underestimate the impact of the trigger?
- ◆ Can I meet my need independently of the other person?

DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS CHECKLIST

1. Preparing for a Difficult Conversation

- Understand and accept that we all make mistakes
- Be honest about all of your intentions regarding the other person
- Assess and take responsibility for what you've contributed to the problem
- Be aware of where your homeostasis is and the other person's homeostasis is
- Choose a good time to have a difficult conversation
- Set aside a sufficient amount of time to really talk with the other person
- Let go of trying to control a person's reactions – use the “And Stance” technique
- Focus on what you can learn about how a person might respond in a difficult conversation and consider how best to respond to those reactions

2. Having the Conversation

- Prepare your opening statement - describe, without judgment, the situation and note differences between you and the other person
- Learn the other person's story
- Tell your story
- Problem-solve together

3. During the Conversation – Speaking Effectively

- Be descriptive, specific, clear and direct – Use the “Me-Me And” technique or the “Don't/Do” technique
- Start with what matters most
- Only speak for yourself and avoid using “always” and “never”
- Observe nonverbal communication
- Use reflections, open-ended questions and check-ins
- Stay in the moment
- Don't make assumptions or judge a person and what he/she is saying
- Don't offer solutions by ordering, threatening, moralizing, advising
- Don't avoid a person's concerns by diverting, logical arguments or reassuring

4. During the Conversation – Listening Well

- Shift your goals from persuasion and winning to learning about a person
- Stop trying to persuade or force a person to do better
- Help a person choose to do better
- Listen, reflect back, ask open-ended questions and acknowledge his/her feelings

5. After the Conversation

- Allow a person some time to process what was discussed
- Schedule a follow-up conversation



Bringing It Home

When you leave the training, what would you begin do differently to manage conflict?

What first steps might you take, and how can you find support for your learning?

What can you do to help others in your workplace manage conflict and communicate more effectively?