# What Is Conflict?

# 1



## LEARNING OUTCOMES

After completing this chapter, you will be able to:

- Define and understand the term *conflict*.
- Understand the underlying causes of conflict.
- Consider how cultural influences, such as values, beliefs, and principles, produce interests and aspirations that, in turn, cause conflicts.
- Challenge the prevailing view that conflict is something negative that ought to be suppressed.
- Promote a new perspective from which contending expectations, interests, and aspirations are seen in a positive light as catalysts for change.
- Apply the new understanding of conflict in class discussions and role-playing exercises.

# Defining Conflict

The focus of this first chapter is conflict and the disputes that arise from it. What is conflict? Where does conflict come from? What choices do we have when it comes to responding to conflict?

**conflict**
a state that exists when one party's aspirations are incompatible with those of another party

Despite our best efforts, **conflict** seems to be an ever-present part of our human experience. Whether in the form of family breakdown, road rage, or terrorist activity, conflict is always occurring in our world. In our everyday lives, we constantly experience the tensions that give rise to it.

Utopian dreamers imagine a day when the world will be at peace and when conflict will be banished from our experience. But the reality is that conflict is a dynamic and necessary part of human life. Sometimes we need it to clear our collective thinking, overcome oppression, and promote change. Without it, life would probably be more boring and static than we would like. Yet with it, given the human capacity for destructive behaviour, our individual selves and our entire world can seem constantly in danger. That threat produces tension and stress.

So if we can't get rid of conflict, how do we come to understand and manage a dispute in more constructive ways?

First, we can accept the following as a basic truth: All people occupy the same Earth, but each of us inhabits a separate perceptual reality. How individuals, families, countries, and cultures make meaning in their lives varies radically. No matter what value, principle, or belief we select as sacred, we must accept that others will see things differently. Even a belief in the sacredness of life is not universal, as kamikaze pilots have shown. Kamikaze pilots came from the heritage of the Japanese samurai, who would readily offer up their lives because they believed that *to die samurai adds meaning to life* (Yamamato, 2002). To them, the concept of dying with honour had a higher value than living a life without it.

# The Origins of Conflict

The fact that people have different values, beliefs, norms, and goals does not in itself make conflict inevitable. In *Social Conflict*, Rubin, Pruitt, and Kim (2004) point out that conflict occurs only when our underlying interests shape themselves into *aspirations* that are *incompatible* with others' aspirations. In other words, conflict arises from incompatibility of **aspirations**. De Bono (2004) points out that different belief systems do not lead to conflict until someone decides that his or her belief system is superior to someone else's and that the other system should not exist.

**aspirations**
the particular hopes and desires that arise from our underlying interests

The same principle holds for cultural customs surrounding modes of dress, worship, eating, and social interaction: Conflicts occur only when one group becomes aggressively exclusive of another. A second point should be made here about the origins of conflict. Even when two parties have seemingly incompatible religious or cultural beliefs and therefore a great potential for conflict, no **dispute** actually exists between them until one sees the other's system as opposed to their own, is able to *name* this opposition as an injury, and is able to identify the other party as the offender and claim some sort of redress.

**dispute**
what occurs when the parties in conflict (a) recognize they are opposed to each other, (b) view each other's opposition as an injury, and (c) lay claim to some form of redress

Without the acts of naming, blaming, and claiming, the conflict may exist but never become an actual dispute. These actions turn an uncomfortable but possibly short-lived conflict into a dispute requiring some form of intervention or resolution. In other words, the existence of underlying friction in a situation only leads to an actual dispute when one party seeks to make their aspirations predominate over another party's.


Ellis and Anderson (2005) suggest that most conflicts are characterized by the perceived presence of two or more of the following instigators of hostile feelings:

1. Different or opposing values or ideals (for example, democracy, security, and women's rights).
2. Divergent interests (tangible things—land, water, and money).
3. Different or opposing cognitions (for example, understanding of history, interpretation of statements, and perceptions of actions).
4. Identifying threats (for example, challenges to a person's sense of self as an individual; a group member who feels entitled to respect).

Admittedly, in our current world, most of the international conflicts that seem to exist involve an imbalance of, or limited access to, needed resources. Countries often fight over water, land, energy, and food, as well as other wealth-producing resources. But international, interracial, and sectarian disputes are often imbued with the other elements stated above. History has forged in different cultures different understandings of acceptable sexuality, the role of women, and the right to education and advancement, among many other things.

Claiming the right to ownership or possession of land can be the source of great conflict. Divergent claims can arise from different interpretations of what makes land sacred. Contrasting views of historical information can give rise to different understandings of what entitles parties to claim the land and its fruits. If we look at the Arab–Israeli conflict, there are numerous claims in regard to actual possession and sovereignty over areas of land, but there is also an incredibly rich history, differently interpreted, involving the core identities of the participants: Christians, Jews, and Muslims. This may be said to be true of Indigenous land claims in Canada, where the very meaning of land and its sacredness varies from culture to culture.

The determination of acceptable sexual practices also varies widely from country to country and culture to culture. Countries with harsh climates and high infant mortality rates often vested in men the right to marry more than one woman to

maintain population and workforce. Some regions with limited food supplies, such as Tibet, often allowed polyandry—a practice in which a woman could marry more than one man—to maintain a lower or manageable birth rate. Some Indigenous societies in the Pacific were highly tolerant of homosexual relationships, whereas societies steeped in the Western religions have tended to be highly judgmental of such inclinations. In Canada, the ongoing movement toward accepting and supporting the LGBTQ+ community is shifting the population's understanding from judgment to acceptance of diversity. This shift in understanding has resulted in a true paradigm shift in the acceptability of individual choices. However, existing traditional attitudes die hard, and many judgments will remain based on historical and religious interpretations. Thus, as the underlying values and beliefs of societies shift and change, conflicts can resolve, but they can also expand, flare up, or commence anew.

We are living in times of change and acceptance in regard to the role of women in society. Saudi Arabia, for example, in 2018, lifted a decades-old ban on women driving. Closer to home, the #MeToo movement has, for example, rewritten and removed the power that used to exist around the director's *casting couch*. One rock star, after being accused of sexual misconduct in 2018, said that his sexual encounters were all consensual and his exploits were all just an acceptable part of *rock culture* ("Hedley Allegations," 2018). Rock culture, it seems, is also evolving. However, in some countries, there are still cultural norms that strongly dictate that women must wear culturally appropriate clothing and that their roles in public be strictly limited.

**IN THE NEWS**

### IDLE NO MORE

In February 2018, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced that the federal government will create new legislation that is intended to make necessary changes to the way in which Canada deals with Indigenous peoples. This comes in the wake of a highly controversial acquittal in Saskatchewan of a white man who had shot and killed 22-year-old Colten Boushie, a member of the Red Pheasant First Nation. The intended legislative changes include how to deal with systemic racism in both broader Canadian society and the criminal justice system. They will also overhaul the process by which land claims and treaty rights are managed.

Some Indigenous people have responded to this announcement with hope, some with skepticism, and others with resistance. The latter group includes activists and others who support the Idle No More movement, a grassroots movement that has stated explicitly that it is opposed to, as it is framed by Coulthard in *Red Skin, White Masks* (2014), the "colonial politics of recognition." The term refers to the attempt by so-called *settler states* to gloss over past and present injustices to Indigenous peoples by recognizing certain rights within a liberal pluralistic democracy. Those in the Idle No More movement see this approach as a threat to Indigenous self-government while also keeping the door open to land grabs by the state, largely for the purposes of accessing mineral and oil and gas resources.

A fundamental values conflict can be seen here in terms of how "land" is viewed. Is it for the extractable resources that lie underneath it, or is it for the nourishment and well-being of those who live on it?

Source: Coulthard (2014).

# Conflict and Meaning

Lederach (1995) proposes we do the following when we consider conflict:

1. See conflict as a natural, common experience in all relationships and cultures.
2. Understand conflict to be a socially constructed event; people are active participants in creating situations and interactions they experience as conflict.
3. Understand that conflict emerges through an interactive process based on the search for shared meaning.
4. Understand that this interactive process is accomplished through, and rooted in, people's perceptions, interpretations, expressions, and intentions, all of which are bound up with their commonsense knowledge.
5. Understand that meaning occurs when people locate themselves and social *things,* such as situations, events, and actions, in their accumulated knowledge. Meaning emerges when one thing is connected to another by an act of comparison. This perspective takes it for granted that a person's common sense and accumulated knowledge are the primary factors in how that person creates, understands, and responds to conflict.
6. Understand that culture is rooted in the shared knowledge and schemes that a group of people has developed for perceiving, interpreting, expressing, and responding to the social realities around them.

Lederach holds a social constructionist point of view: We create our own meanings. De Bono (1985) shares a similar view when he describes our minds as active self-organizing systems. Each of us actively takes in information about our worlds in our own way; new information is ordered in our minds according to what is already there.

Something shifts in our thinking about conflict when we stop seeing it as a negative thing and begin to see it as a common experience arising from the need for adaptation and new meaning. By adopting this perspective, we begin to see conflict not as a clash but as a creative opportunity.

Let us return to Lederach's list of considerations about conflict.

First, conflicts don't just happen arbitrarily; they can be seen as socially constructed events. Conflicts are not unnatural, fearful, or irrational happenings; they are often a necessary step in the evolution of **new, shared meaning**. Second, Lederach doesn't demonize conflict; he calls it a "natural, common experience" in "all relationships and cultures." This acceptance of the necessity and universality of conflict encourages us to acknowledge it in positive ways rather than to ignore, repress, or stifle it.

**new, shared meaning** the shared understanding that can develop, through dialogue and an exchange of ideas, between parties in conflict

Finally, Lederach notes that culture is rooted in the shared knowledge and schemes that a group of people has developed for perceiving, interpreting, expressing, and responding to the social realities they face. As human beings, we always begin our lives as ego- and ethnocentric. The values, beliefs, and principles that come to us through family, religion, and culture are the ones we first adapt to and find comfort in. As we grow and branch out of our formative social circles, our academic and professional circles and the relationships we build within them help to shape our thinking. For example, those involved in legal professions are conditioned through training to view the world through a rights- and power-based lens. Social services and psychological support professionals are trained to view the world from a place of prioritizing human needs for personal growth and happiness. The extent to which

those values are taken on by any individual and how they are interpreted and acted upon will be influenced by the values established earlier in life. Our values mould our self-image and create a zone of comfort from which each of us can deal with the world of experience. What becomes real to each of us does so simply through the process of our living in a particular time and place. Social realities vary between families and between cultures.

**IN THE NEWS**

**LGBT PURGE**

Underlying social beliefs and values can either create conflict or create a platform of understanding that promotes acceptance of diversity.

In the 1980s, a woman was dismissed from the Canadian military for being a lesbian. Her case is one of many under a now defunct policy of systemic discrimination that has become known as the "LGBT Purge." This policy was recently the subject of a class action lawsuit against the Government of Canada and a historic apology from Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. The case was settled in Federal Court in 2018.

# Individual Reality

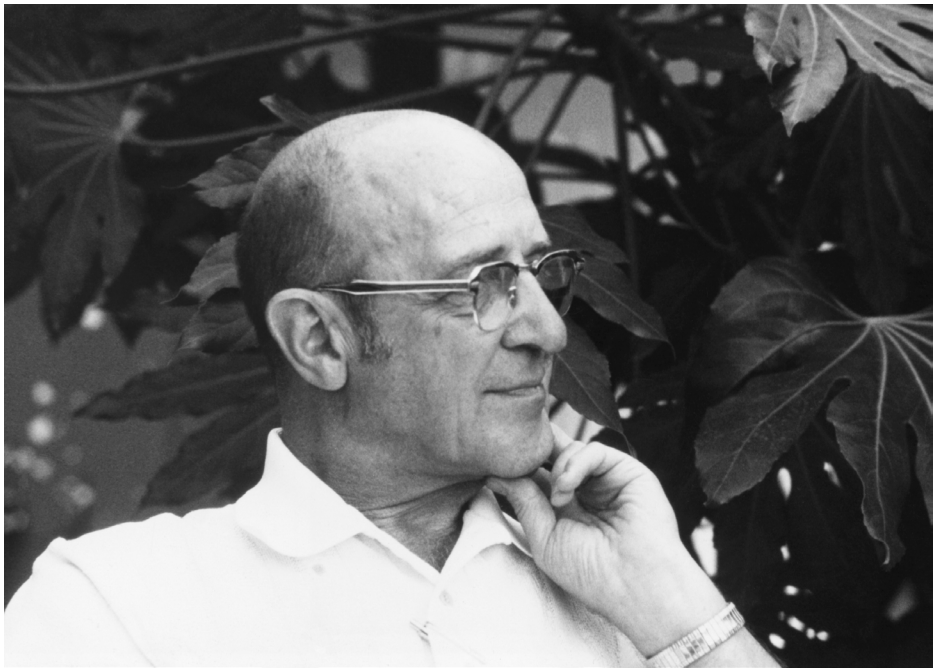
Each of us has, of necessity, developed an individual world view—an individual reality. Our perception of our own interests, needs, fears, desires, and hopes will be shaped by our individual experience. It follows from this that another person's vision of the world is bound to be different from our own and may be difficult for us to grasp. Understanding this simple principle of subjectivity enables us to see that another's perceptions and interests, though inconsistent with our own, will make complete sense to him or her. Such understanding can make us more open-minded and help us look at issues in a broader context (De Bono, 2004). It can reduce our hostility toward opposing points of view so that we can appreciate another's perspective while maintaining our own.

By examining our own stereotypes, first impressions, and accumulated value judgments, we can get a clearer sense of how the other party's reality may be composed. Carl Rogers, in his seminal publication *Client Centered Therapy* (1951), set out four helpful rules of thumb for exploring another person's reality. To paraphrase him:

1. Every person exists in a continually changing world of experience of which he or she is the centre.
2. The individual reacts to his or her world as he or she experiences and perceives it; thus, his or her perceptual world is the reality for that individual.
3. The individual has one basic tendency, or drive, and that is to actualize, maintain, and enhance himself or herself.
4. Therefore, the best vantage point for understanding another person's behaviour is from within that person's internal **frame of reference**.

**frame of reference**
a person's subjective reality, shaped by his or her particular experience and culture, and the basis for his or her perception of the world

The important point here is that solutions to conflicts, if they are going to be real and meaningful for the disputing parties, must come from within the parties' own frames of reference. To create new, shared meaning that integrates conflicting realities, you must begin by understanding those realities.



Carl Rogers defined state of empathy, or being empathetic, as perceiving the internal frame of reference of another with accuracy and with the emotional components and meanings that pertain thereof as if one were the person (Rogers, 1980).

# Changing Minds

When you seek to resolve a conflict, you are, by definition, promoting change and a transformation of the disputants' existing perceptions. Many people believe that our perceptions (that is, our way of seeing the world) cannot change because they are so strongly conditioned by culture and social environment. Marylyn Ferguson disagreed with this view in *The Aquarian Conspiracy* (2009) and pointed out that we can change our minds in four basic ways (as shown in Figure 1.1):

1. by exception,
2. by incremental change,
3. by pendulum swing, or
4. by paradigm shift.

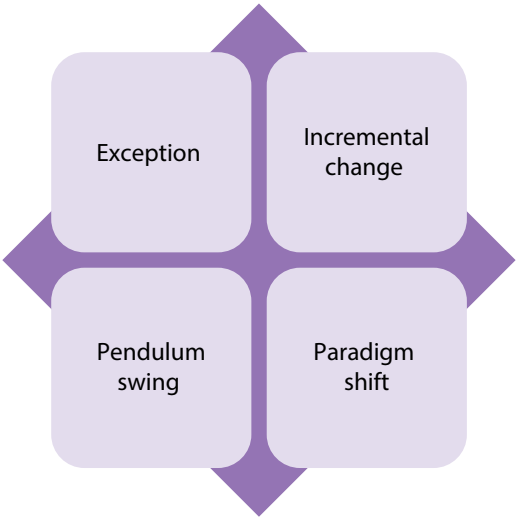
## Exception

Let us consider a woman who has lived through an abusive marriage. Her early experiences with her brothers and her father were also negative. She holds the perception, through her various experiences, that all men are untrustworthy, abusive toward women, and just plain bad.

If the woman were to meet one man, say a widower, who was kind to his children and gracious to her and other women, she might conclude that this one man was an exception to her general conclusion about men. Her basic perception of men would remain unaltered. The kind man would simply be an exception to the rule. This represents the most minimal type of change, **change by exception**.

**change by exception**
the mental change that occurs when a person with an absolute view of something acknowledges an exception to the rule

**Figure 1.1 The Ways in Which We Change Our Minds**




## Incremental Change

If our woman started dating the widower and in time met many of his male friends, who were also gracious to her, her perception of men in general might remain basically the same and yet be incrementally changing—that is, changing a bit at a time. **Incremental change** is slow and tends to be unconscious.

**incremental change**
the gradual change of mind that occurs when a person starts finding numerous exceptions to a rule he or she once thought absolute

## Change by Pendulum Swing

**Change by pendulum swing** is the abandonment of one closed and certain system for another. Our woman falls head over heels in love with the widower and decides she was wrong before and now sees the truth—all men are kind and gracious. The problem with this type of change is that it completely abandons old experiences and fails to be discriminating about the new.

**change by pendulum swing**
the change of mind that occurs when a person abandons one closed and certain system for another

## Paradigm Shift

In this scenario, the woman undergoes a **paradigm shift**. She could realize, very consciously, that she was a little bit right about men before and that with each new experience of men she has, her sense of them is becoming fuller and more accurate. She is not abandoning her earlier views on men; she is progressively adjusting them. Her fundamental pattern of perceiving men is shifting.

There are different ways for people to change their minds, perceptions, and positions. Not all of them are equally profound or durable. But through trust and the willingness to learn, we can effect change and acknowledge that all people are a little bit right (that is, right from within their own frame of reference) and that, through exploration and understanding, we can all be a little bit more right.

The value of trying to understand the interests and perceptions of others, particularly others with whom we are in conflict, is summed up in a prayer written by Chief Dan George (2017): "Speak to the animals that you may know them. For what we do not know, we fear, and what we fear we destroy."

**paradigm shift**
the change of mind that occurs when a person integrates his or her old views with new perceptions and understands that experience will further refine these views

## KEY TERMS

aspirations, 4
change by exception, 9
change by pendulum swing, 10
conflict, 4
dispute, 4
frame of reference, 8
incremental change, 10
new, shared meaning, 7
paradigm shift, 10

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## QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

1. Choose and analyze a conflict you have experienced. First, analyze what was at stake. From your perspective, what was it that you believed in or needed? What did the other party believe in or need, from their perspective? Why or how were the needs *incompatible*? Was it easier to walk away from the differences, or did you strongly feel the need to prove yourself right and the other wrong?

2. Our sense of contradiction often leads us to conclude that there can only be one right answer or correct resolution to any disagreement. At the same time, on another level, we are aware that this simply isn't true; there can often be more than one right answer. To heighten your awareness of the differences in our perceptions, interpretations, and needs, try the following role-playing exercise.

   Three people are walking through an old forest on the outskirts of an urban area: an environmentalist, a real estate developer, and a lumberman. While viewing exactly the same forest, each sees it differently both in terms of its value and potential. Select three parties or groups to represent each of the individuals. Have them do the following:

   **a.** Clearly define what values each individual sees in the forest.

   **b.** Describe what personal interest each might have in developing the forest, harvesting it, or leaving it intact.

   **c.** Define what broader social interests each person sees themselves promoting.

   When people with differing interests or value systems approach the same situations or circumstances, they often tend to speak a different "language." Have each group or individual explain to the others their particular vision and aspirations for the use of the forest and why their vision is the most valid and justifiable.

3. George and Tang are from different cultural heritages. George was born in Canada and was raised in the Judeo-Christian ethic and belief system. From childhood, he was taught to believe in creationism. His family has always sponsored involvement in music because they believe music is the medium through

which people are connected to the angels. Tang, on the other hand, was born in China. He learned at an early age that one approaches the eternal by stillness, through meditation. The two men are now attending the same university and live in adjoining residence rooms. Each night after studying, George likes to play the "Hallelujah Chorus" loudly in his room. This usually happens at 10 o'clock, just as Tang, next door, is settling in for meditation. Tang's culture promotes a high degree of respect for others when it comes to allowing them to save face.

In discussion or through role-playing, determine the following:

**a.** Is there a conflict?

**b.** Does the conflict, if there is one, arise from the differences in cultural understandings or from the aspirations that each party has at a given time?

**c.** What will it take to raise this matter to an actual dispute, and is this likely to happen?

**4.** Set out in your own words why conflict may, in fact, be a necessary and positive phenomenon. Find examples in your own life of cases where positive shifts or understandings have grown out of what were apparently unresolvable conflicts.

**5.** Answer three of the following questions, all of which concern the environmental influences on your view of conflict and on your ability to define and respond to it. How did your parents compete with each other over ideas and interests when you were children? How did they react to competition and rivalry between you and your siblings? What views did they have on disputes in the community, the workplace, the country, and the world? How did your teachers deal with conflict in classrooms? How did the peers of your childhood and youth approach conflict, and what did they expect of your response to it both within and outside your peer group? How has the news media affected your perception of conflict? How do your boss, co-workers, and general work environment affect your understanding of what conflict is and how it should be responded to? How does your chosen religious affiliation, if you have any, add to or affect your view of conflict? Think for a moment of our politicians, of your current partner, of your friends and consider how these people influence, directly and indirectly, your perception of disputes in the world.

**6.** Imagine this scenario involving an elderly mother, whose health is becoming progressively poor, and her son, who is looking after her welfare. The mother lives alone in her own home, which she loves because it gives her independence. The son has growing concerns about his mother's house and her ability to look after herself. He wants her to move into a nursing home, where services will be provided. The mother insists that she can still do her own shopping, her own cooking, and her own cleaning. However, she has injured herself falling down stairs and has bouts of dementia.

In teams of two to four, reflect on the following questions:

**a.** Establish the legitimate interests, values, and needs of each party in the scenario.

**b.** Divide your team into two so that one team represents the son and the other represents the mother. Enter into a dialogue. Watch carefully for the tendency to slip into adversarial discussion, which, once entrenched, may escalate.

**c.** Think of how you might maintain a cooperative atmosphere and dialogue between the parties.

**7.** Research and consider the conflict in Canada in 2017–2018 over pipeline proposals (i.e., the Trans Mountain Pipeline, also known as Kinder Morgan) from Alberta to tidewater in British Columbia. Identify the various groups who are considered stakeholders in this conflict and list the points of conflict between each.