

CHAPTER 7

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT



BP Oil workers attempt to clean oil-covered sand at Pensacola Beach after BP's Deepwater Horizon oil rig exploded in 2010.

PUBLIC RELATIONS PRINCIPLES

CHAPTER OUTLINE

Conflict Management

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CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

After studying this chapter, you should be able to:

1. Define conflict and distinguish between conflict and crisis.
2. Identify the contexts in which conflict occurs in public relations.
3. Explain how a public relations professional can act as a party to a conflict and/or a third-party mediator.
4. Identify and understand different strategies for managing conflict in public relations.
5. Develop strategies for professional success related to conflict management.



RIPPED FROM THE HEADLINES >>>

In November of 2014, the Sony Corporation announced it would cut ties with FIFA (the international governing body of association football) over its decision to award the 2018 and 2022 competitions to Russia and Qatar. The decision comes as claims of human rights violations and corruption mount against Qatar and FIFA, respectively. Charges have been leveled against Qatar asserting that their use of migrant workers in building new stadiums has violated international human rights laws; supposedly migrant workers have been denied proper food, water, and housing and have also had their right to leave the country revoked until work has been completed. FIFA is also under scrutiny concerning the bidding process that awarded the 2018 and 2022 World Cups to Russia and Qatar; many international groups want an independent investigation to discover if FIFA officials misused their power and benefited illegally in awarding the World Cups to two nations that have spotty track records on human rights issues.

As major sponsors continue to back out of major contracts due to conflicts between international bodies and FIFA itself, FIFA has invited several top-level global PR firms to offer strategies to bolster the reputations of the next two World Cups. However, due to the inflammatory and worldwide nature of this conflict, many major PR firms have distanced themselves from FIFA; both the Edelman and Bell Pottinger PR firms announced that they will not pitch for the account.

As you move forward in this chapter concerning conflicts, conflict management, and conflict resolution strategies, refer back to the previous example and reflect on how massive certain conflicts can become. Conflicts can occur between individuals, departments, organizations, and even international communities. After finishing this chapter, you should be aware of the conflict-resolution strategies available to PR professionals in dealing with conflicts on both individual and global scales.



Issues concerning the treatment of migrant workers has caused conflict for Qatar's 2022 World Cup bid.

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CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

No specific formula exists for managing public relations. As a public relations professional, you wouldn't typically walk into work and check things off your list the way an assembly worker or quality control specialist might. However, several plans, or contingencies, exist for managing public relations. Based on the specific circumstances, you can select a plan that best addresses the public relations concern. Your response plan will range on a continuum from pure accommodation to pure advocacy.

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Advocacy and Accommodation

Advocacy: you meet the needs of your organization or a stakeholder group at the expense of the needs of the other sides.

When you choose pure **advocacy**, you meet the needs of your organization or a stakeholder group at the expense of the needs of the other sides. Therefore, advocates are defenders of the organization. As an advocate, you would engage strategies that would defend and protect the organization at all costs. When you select pure **accommodation**, the polar opposite of advocacy, you meet the needs of the public at the expense of the organization or stakeholder's needs. This continuum is referred to as the Contingency Theory of Public Relations (Cancel, Cameron, Sallot, & Mitrook, 1997).

Accommodation: the polar opposite of advocacy, you meet the needs of the public at the expense of the organization or stakeholder's needs.



When conflict occurs between an organization and its public, public relations managers will choose an approach somewhere along the continuum. The approach selected is contingent, or dependent, on the characteristics of the situation, including both external (e.g., threat, environment, characteristics of the public) and internal (e.g., characteristics of the organization, the organization-public relationship) factors.

You must understand the situation, based on the internal and external factors, to determine which contingency to use. Conflict management requires the same approach. Every conflict is unique, and various causes create and contribute to conflict.

Many different tactics and responses exist for managing conflict. To select the best conflict management approach, you must understand the conflict and its characteristics. Defining conflict is the first step to understanding conflict.

DEFINING CONFLICT

Conflict versus Crisis

Before diving into conflict and conflict management, it is important to distinguish between two commonly confused terms used in public relations:

conflict and crisis. We often hear of organizations that have experienced crisis. As you learned in Chapter 5, **crisis** is defined as “a major occurrence with a potentially negative outcome affecting the organization, company, or industry, as well as its publics, products, services, or good name” (Fearn-Banks, 2011, p. 2). For example, British Petroleum (BP) experienced a crisis when their off-shore drilling rig in the Gulf of Mexico leaked oil for 87 days in 2010. This “major occurrence” negatively impacted BP, the oil industry, the environment, those living off the Gulf coast, and many others.

Crisis: a major event with potential negative consequences for an organization, publics, products, reputations, and the like.



The BP oil spill crisis resulted in a massive public fallout.

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A **conflict**, on the other hand, is defined as “an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from others in achieving their goals” (Hocker & Wilmot, 2013, p. 11). A conflict is distinguished from a crisis by the “*struggle between at least two interdependent parties*,” and is therefore relational in nature. As the public relations field has shifted from a persuasive orientation to a communicative orientation, the relationship between an organization and its publics has become more important. Relationships are built and fostered through communication. When conflict occurs, communication must be employed to manage the conflict effectively. The definition of conflict highlights several key components. The following sections define and explain those components.

Conflict: a communicatively expressed tension characterized by a struggle between two or more relationally dependent individuals or entities.

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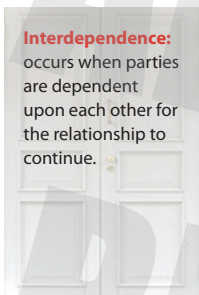
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Expressed Struggle



Conflict is an **expressed struggle**. Conflict is a communicative act. When you are in conflict, you and your partner exchange communicative messages. You express verbal and nonverbal communicative messages, and both can be equally effective. Avoiding eye contact, clenching fists, and talking in short, clipped sentences communicate conflict as effectively as shouting, "I'm so mad at you!" You express conflict with your words, with the tone, pitch, or volume of your voice, or with your body language and nonverbal gestures. Messages can be very obvious or very subtle, but all of these messages communicate, or express, that conflict exists.

Interdependence



You engage in conflict with those with whom you are interdependent; that is, you and the other party are dependent upon each other. In your personal relationships, you and your relational partner depend on each other to maintain the relationship. In work groups, the group members depend on one another to accomplish tasks and complete a project. As a PR professional, you are interdependent with a client. You rely on the client to follow the plans you put into place, and the client relies on you to manage their image effectively. You do not have conflict with those with whom you are not interdependent. For example, you don't have conflict with co-workers about music preferences because your job and relationship aren't dependent on the type of music you like. However, you may conflict with a co-worker over how to complete a project because your job is dependent on successful completion of the work.

Perception

Conflict is rooted in perception. You may perceive that you and your relational partner have different goals, not enough resources, or that someone is getting in your way. It is important to remember that perception is subjective; that is, your perception of a situation could be drastically different than someone else's perception of that same situation. For example, you may perceive that a co-worker who asks your supervisor to join a project you're working on is trying to "show off," when in fact the co-worker may be trying to be helpful.

because she has previous experience with a similar project. A perception of incompatible goals defines this conflict: you perceive that your coworker's goal is advancement, which directly competes with your own goals, perhaps advancement for yourself, or a goal to supervise and control the project in your own way. In this conflict, competition itself doesn't cause the conflict but rather *your perception* of competition causes the conflict.

Incompatible Goals

People engage in conflict over goals that are important to them. As a PR professional, you may perceive competing goals with a client. Imagine a scenario where your client is facing a product recall due to a faulty product. The client wants to issue a press release denying any involvement with the problem. You believe a better way to manage the situation is through acknowledgement, apology, and a plan for resolving the problem. Your client is insisting on the denial. You have perceived incompatible goals: the client wants to deny and you want to apologize and move forward. While these goals are perceived to be incompatible, which is causing the conflict, the goals are actually more in tandem than you may think: you both want to repair the company's image.

In order to manage conflict effectively, it is important to understand when your own and others' goals are in a conflict. In understanding the goals, you are better able to see where your goals align and where they diverge and are thereby better able to see a clearer picture of the conflict.



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Faulty products can cause major public relations conflicts if not handled with care.

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PR COMPANY PROFILE

From comfortable suites in New York City and Los Angeles, the marketing geniuses at Crenshaw Communications manage public relations for clients that include businesses, corporations, celebrities and other famous people. This company finds ways to promote individuals and enterprises online and in real life. Press releases form an important component of digital public relations that are primarily managed on social networks such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Crenshaw Communications could also help clients build long-lasting relationships with key partners in specific industries. Product promotions are also done in trade shows, conferences and other major events that could generate some buzz.

CRENSHAW COMMUNICATIONS WEBSITE: <http://crenshawcomm.com/>

SOURCE: <http://www.10bestpr.com/companies/>



TRIP Model of Goals

Hocker and Wilmot (2013) use the TRIP acronym to identify four types of goals: topic, relational, identity, and process goals. While these are individual goals, you and your relational partner's goals may overlap during conflict, or they may shift throughout the conflict.

Topic goals:
content goals, or
goals that address
wants of each party
in conflict.

Relational goals:
goals concerned
with what
goals relational
partners have for a
relationship.

Topic. **Topic goals**, or content goals, address what each party in conflict wants. In your personal life, you may want to borrow your roommate's car. In school, you may want a professor to change your grade. At work, you might want a co-worker to take more responsibility for a project. As a public relations professional, you manage topic goals between the client and the public. The client's goal may be to sell a product while the public may want the organization punished for distributing a faulty product. Topic goals are easily identifiable. When you ask someone why they are in conflict, they will typically identify a topic goal; however, while topic goals are the easiest to identify, other goals may be more pressing.

Relational. **Relational goals** are concerned with what goals you have for a relationship with another, or who you are to each other. These goals are characterized by how you want to be treated by your relational partner, how much interdependence you want from that person, or how much influence you want to have over each other. In your personal relationships, you may see

your relationship differently than your relational partner does. For example, you may want to become exclusive with a person you've been dating. You could have compatible goals (i.e., he or she wants to be exclusive as well) or incompatible goals (i.e., he or she wants to continue to play the field). Respect is an important key to relationships. You may want your parents to respect your role as an adult and to respect the choices you make. At work, you want your co-workers to respect your ability to do your job effectively. In public relations, the public may demand that the organization respect their intelligence. When crisis occurs, a client may try to "pass the buck" and place the blame on a scapegoat outside of the organization. Publics will typically see through this and be insulted by an assumption that they are too dim to see your end game.

Relational goals are critical in public relations. Public relations is often defined by the *relationship* between the organization and its publics. Your job as a public relations professional is to manage the relationship between the two groups. Ignoring relational goals, particularly those of its publics, negatively impacts the organization, its reputation, and its relationship with its publics.

Identity. **Identity goals** are concerned with maintaining face. Face theory, developed by Erving Goffman (1959), suggests that when we communicate with others, we present our face, or our public self. Our face is what we want others to see of us. In conflict, we have concerns for maintaining our face, and conflict occurs or is exacerbated when our face is challenged. Imagine that you cannot turn a paper in by the deadline. You consider yourself a good student, but something has happened in your personal life that prevented you from completing your assignment. You will most likely become frustrated when your professor accuses you of being lazy—this challenges the public self you are presenting of a good student. A public relations professional is continuously concerned with managing the "face" of the organization. When a crisis occurs, the organization's face is challenged, it may lose face, and the PR team works to save face.

Identity goals: goals concerned with maintaining face.

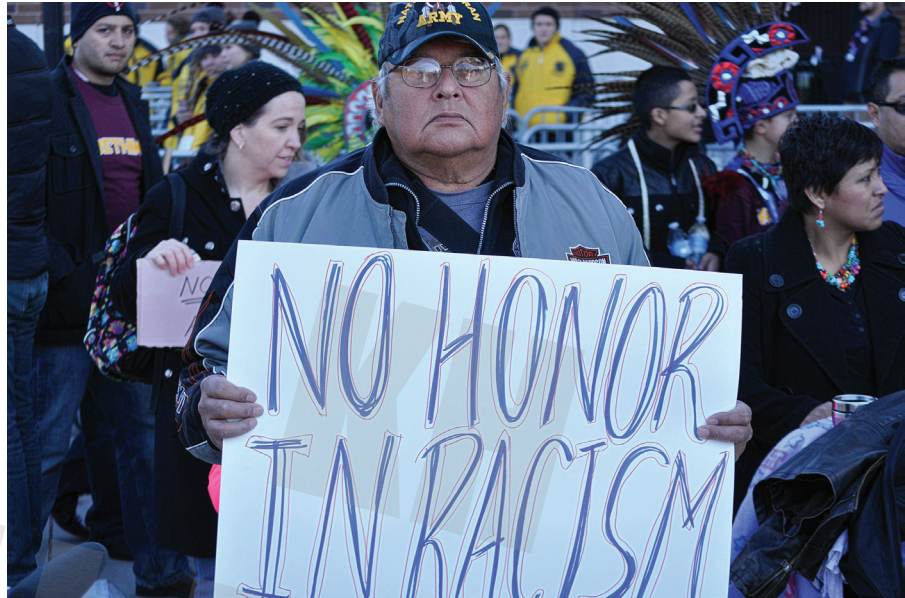
Identity goals are arguably the most salient goals when talking about public relations. While the relationship between the organization and its publics is important, the relationship is dependent on and impacted by the identity of the organization. An organization's identity is directly related to the organization's reputation. When an organization that traditionally has a reputation of being trustworthy, honest, and good is found out to have covered up a scandal (e.g., environmental contamination, product flaw, etc.), their identity is challenged. When their identity is challenged, the relationship between the organization and its publics can be negatively impacted.

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The NFL team Washington Redskins faces an identity crisis as some people identify their mascot and team name as racist.



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Process goals: goals concerned with how communication and conflict will occur.

Process. **Process goals** are concerned with how communication and conflict will occur. In all conflicts, we create rules for how to manage conflict. Married couples are often given the advice, “never go to bed angry.” This suggests the process for managing conflict includes working through issues in a timely manner. Managers in a supportive work environment are encouraged to discuss news—good or bad—one on one with the interested party. Managers should not criticize or praise subordinates in front of their peers. This process helps alleviate fear, resentment, and envy in the workplace. A public relations professional has different contingency plans available to address different issues or crises. When a crisis occurs, the most appropriate contingency is utilized to minimize the threat to face and to begin the process of restoring face. The contingencies function as process goals, and a public relations manager and the organization may conflict over which contingency, or process, is the best approach to the given situation.

Goals overlap and shift. It isn't very often that a conflict is characterized by a single goal; more realistically, you have multiple goals in conflict. Although conflicts are typically characterized by identifying topic goals, other goals, such as relational and identity goals, may be more critical to a given conflict scenario. A product recall presents a topic goal of conflict—the public is in conflict with the organization because it created a faulty product. Additionally, and perhaps more critically, the product recall is at the same time characterized by relational goals (e.g., the organization wants

a good relationship with the public) and identity goals (e.g., the organization wants to be seen as a professional, ethical entity that the public can trust). Furthermore, the conflict can also be characterized by process goals. The public may be upset with the process the organization used to alert the public and manage the recall, and have different ideas for how the situation should have been addressed.

Not only do multiple goals exist simultaneously, but also goal importance will shift throughout a conflict. When a product recall first happens, an organization's main goals are topic and identity goals. First, the recall needs to be managed (topical) to minimize the future impact of the problem (e.g., remove product from shelves, develop a strategy for repairing a faulty product, etc.). Simultaneously, the organization must work to reinforce its identity. An organization that traditionally has been viewed as a genuine, compassionate organization will manage the message in a way that reinforces that identity. Once the organization has managed the topical and identity goals, the goal importance shifts to a relational goal, specifically repairing the relationship between the organization and the public; however, without first fixing the problem (topic) and assuring the public that the organization is good and trustworthy (identity), there is no basis upon which to repair the relationship.

Understanding how goals overlap and shift in conflict serve several purposes. First, understanding how goals overlap can help parties in conflict identify the causes and issues in conflict, and to understand the interdependence of those goals. Second, understanding how goals can shift during conflict helps the parties involved to track the conflict and focus on the goals that are important at any given time. Finally, understanding goals, how they function together, and how goal importance shifts can enable parties to manage their strategy for addressing conflict, and tactics can change according to the situational needs.

Scarce Resources

Perception of **scarce resources** is another source of conflict. When parties perceive that there is not enough to go around, they can find themselves competing. Scarce resources can be tangible (e.g., money, space, etc.) or intangible (e.g., time, power, attention, etc.). A single piece of pie left at Thanksgiving dinner creates a perception of scarce resources between you and your Uncle Bob. As a public relations professional, you may battle over perceived scarce resources with a co-worker when a job promotion you're both

Scarce resources:
a shortage of
resources available
to individuals or
entities.

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qualified for becomes available, or you may have conflict with a competing firm in securing an account for your organization.

Interference

Interference:
impeding the ability
of an individual or
entity to achieve
goals.

Finally, parties can be in conflict over perceived **interference**. In football, pass interference is called when an opposing player impedes the ability of an eligible receiver of a fair attempt to make a catch. In conflict, you perceive interference when you believe someone is preventing you from achieving our goals. In your job, you may perceive interference when you have weekend plans and your boss asks you to work Saturday. Or, your public relations plan for a client may rely on cultivating the image of a family company, but you perceive interference when the CEO is caught in a tawdry sex scandal. In both scenarios, someone is preventing you from accomplishing something you view as important, and therefore conflict erupts.

As you can see in the examples above, conflict and the causes of conflict are not unique to a specific context. You experience the same causes of conflict in a variety of contexts: your relationship, the workplace, and across organizations to name a few. Sometimes the causes will manifest similarly across contexts; other times, they will manifest quite differently.

Conflict can arise from interference, as seen in this protest in Istanbul, Turkey.



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CONTEXTS FOR CONFLICT IN PR

As a PR professional, you are managing relationships and conflict at many different levels. A great deal of conflict scholarship focuses on interpersonal relationships; however, a PR professional must also consider conflict at more macro levels, including intergroup and interorganizational levels (Miller, 2012). Understanding the nuances of the different contexts in which conflict can occur can help you think about which conflict management strategy would be most appropriate and effective.

Interpersonal Conflict

Interpersonal conflicts occur on an individual level. Both peer (co-workers at the same organizational level) and mixed status (superior-subordinate) relationships are susceptible to interpersonal conflict; however, managing conflict in peer relationships may be different. Consider, for example, a scenario wherein you are managing a conflict concerning the perceived scarce resource of power. Imagine that you are battling with a co-worker about where an event should be held. With a peer, it may be more likely that you would use a more competitive approach to the conflict, focusing on your own needs and wants over those of your peer because the power is balanced. In a similar battle with a superior, you may use a more accommodating approach, giving in to your boss' wants and sacrificing your own because your boss holds more power in the relationship. Your conflict management approach is dependent on your relationship with your conflicting party.

Intergroup Conflict

Intergroup conflicts are conflicts among groups of people within an organization. These groups can take many forms, including different teams and departments. Intergroup conflicts can erupt for many reasons. Teams may compete for resources. For example, teams representing different clients

PR TIP

STAY CALM & REACT ACCORDINGLY

Steve Jobs talked about inevitable failures in business by saying, "Sometimes when you innovate, you make mistakes. It is best to admit them quickly, and get on with improving your other innovations." This would have been good advice for bakery owners Amy and Samy Bouzaglatell. Instead of taking the high road, when their business was hit with harsh criticism, they launched a firestorm on Reddit, Yelp, and Facebook. It only served to crown their bakery with the Worst Business Award in 2013. The Bouzaglatells would have no doubt weathered the storm much better had they kept calm and carried on. Own the problem, move on, make improvements and focus on the positives.

SOURCE:

<http://www.10bestpr.com/tips/6-10/>



Interpersonal conflicts: conflicts among relational partners.

Intergroup conflicts: conflicts among groups of people within an organization.

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may compete over financial resources for their campaigns. Departments may conflict over processes and deadlines; for example, the creative team and technology team may conflict over when a website can be up and running. The creative team might argue for an earlier deadline, but the technology team knows the amount of time it takes to develop and test a website, and therefore argues for an extended deadline. Various teams may conflict with the accounting department about the process for filing purchase orders. Within the organization, these conflicts can be resolved in many different ways. Depending on the organizational structure, it may be up to the teams/departments to work through the issue, or the solution could be created by a third party. For example, in the accounting example above, a more senior member of the organization may step in and demand the accounting department process a request from the creative team regardless of the procedures and policies because the superior considers the creative team to be on a short deadline. This, of course, is a short-term resolution, and eventually, the teams will most likely need to develop a better process for managing funding requests.

Intergroup conflict can be especially toxic to a professional work environment.



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ETHICS in PRACTICE



Barbara works for a large retail company in the customer service department. Recently, the marketing department in her company launched an aggressive advertising campaign for a new product still in the quality-assurance-testing phase. As orders began pouring in, the marketing director of Barbara's company decided to move forward with shipping despite the fact that the product had not been cleared for retail use yet. The result involved many customers complaining of defective products, with Barbara's customer service department taking the brunt of the blame. This caused a major conflict between Barbara's department and the marketing department, with both sides attempting to shift blame on the other. The VP of their company did not bother with conflict resolution, instead opting to blame both parties equally. Barbara and the marketing director were both dismissed from the company.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

1. What ethical considerations were ignored during this conflict?
2. What strategies were available to Barbara that could have led to an effective conflict resolution?
3. When dealing with conflicts between different departments in a company, what type of mediation (if any) should be used?
4. What failures did the company make when handling this interdepartment conflict?

Interorganizational Conflict

Interorganizational conflicts are disputes between two or more organizations. In the field of public relations, there are numerous opportunities for conflict to emerge between organizations, whether it be competition for a share of the marketplace, negotiating the price on an event venue, or a disagreement with publics over religious or political values. In these disputes, a public relations professional can act as a party to the conflict, or, more unique to the public relations field, a public relations professional can act as a third-party mediator.

Interorganizational conflicts: disputes between two or more organizations.



Public relations firms can function as conflict parties. Disputes can emerge between public relations firms and other organizations. As a public relations professional, you may compete with other firms in obtaining a client (a perceived scarce resource). You may also conflict with the media regarding how stories should be covered, when the media can have access to information, and the like. In managing a client's image, you also have conflict opportunity with vendors, venues, and other organizations in the process of planning events. Finally, a major area of concern is conflict between a public

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Public relations professionals must walk a tightrope of advising their customers about what works best without alienating their perceived image.

independent third party to conflict. A mediator is typically considered a process expert; that is, the mediator's job is to help conflicting parties through the communication process of conflict management. In his work with the Taiwanese Legislature, Huang (2001) found that public relations strategies can help resolve conflict between the organization and the public by improving the relationship between the organization and the public. As a public relations professional, you are charged with managing your client's image, or managing their identity, thereby managing the relationship the organization has with the public. When crisis occurs, the relationship between the client and critical stakeholders is challenged and must be repaired. It is your job to use the appropriate strategies to repair the relationship, thereby resolving the conflict. While the model of an independent, neutral third party is typical of traditional mediation, within the public relations field, it is argued that it is not absolutely necessary for a mediator to be independent (Sherman, 2003). In fact, a public relations manager can function as an affiliated third party, trained in conflict resolution strategies, and charged with mediating the conflict between the organization and the public. When you are affiliated with one of the organizations in conflict, you are more knowledgeable on the conflict and therefore better able to suggest and troubleshoot potential resolutions.

relations firm and the client. Clients often will have a vision for what they want or what a plan should be for their company's image while the public relations team may have a completely different vision. Both groups have experience on their side: the company has institutional memory, understands the reputation of the organization, and embodies the organization's value and mission, while the public relations team has experience and knowledge in public relations theory, strategies, and tactics, particularly what is and is not effective. These disputes are particularly tricky to negotiate. The client in this situation holds a great deal of power—they pay the firm after all. The firm must navigate how to persuade the client that their approach is best without losing them as a client.

Public relations firms can also function as third-party mediators. Unique to the public relations field is that public relations professionals work as third-party mediators to conflict, specifically when conflict emerges between a client and critical stakeholders or publics. A third-party mediator is a person who acts as a neutral,



JOB SEARCH KEYWORD: Employee/Member Relations

Responding to concerns and informing and motivating an organization's employees or members, its retirees, and their families.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION STRATEGIES

Conflict can occur for many different reasons—someone challenges our goals, we perceive someone as competing with us for resources, we perceive interference—and when this happens, the most important decision you will make is how to manage the conflict (Sillars & Wilmot, 1994). How you respond to the conflict sets the stage for the rest of the interaction. If you become competitive, refuse to compromise, and hold your ground, your relationship with the other party will be much different than if you choose to engage in a dialogue, explore common interests, and work collaboratively. In understanding different approaches to managing conflict, you can become more self-aware by identifying your own conflict style, but also begin to understand when using specific approaches is most appropriate.

Styles vs. Tactics

Hocker and Wilmot (2013) distinguish between conflict styles and conflict tactics. **Conflict styles** are the overall responses to conflict. When in conflict, you have somewhat of a default setting—a way you typically approach conflict. **Conflict tactics** are the individual moves you use in conflict that develop your overall conflict style. If you engage in name-calling, shouting, and poor listening during a conflict, these tactics could be representative of a more competitive approach to conflict. If you tend to listen carefully, express yourself clearly, and look for mutual interests and outcomes, you may have a more collaborative conflict style.

Conflict style: an overall response to conflict, made up of conflict tactics.

Conflict tactics: the individual moves or strategies you use in conflict that develop your overall conflict style.

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Conflict Styles

Several typologies of conflict styles have been developed over the years (Deutsch, 1949; Putnam & Wilson, 1982; to name a few). Currently, the most common is Kilmann and Thomas' (1975) five-style approach. The five conflict styles are developed based on two dimensions: concern for self (assertiveness) and concern for other (cooperativeness), and are described in Table 7.1.

>> TOOLS FOR THE PUBLIC RELATIONS PROFESSIONAL

>>TABLE 7.1

Conflict Style	Concern for Self	Concern for Other	Characteristics
Competition	High	Low	A confrontational approach, concerned with achieving own goals without regard for the goals of the other party
Accommodation	Low	High	Abandoning your own goals so that the other party can achieve his/hers
Avoidance	Low	Low	Denying the conflict exists and skirting around the conflict
Compromise	Moderate	Moderate	Achieve some of your own goals, but forgo some in favor of the other party partially achieving his/her goals, commonly referred to as "splitting up the pie" (most commonly used approach) (Sillars, 1980)
Collaboration	High	High	Mutual engagement in the conflict in an effort to achieve all goals for both parties and improve the relationship (most constructive)



When possible, the compromise strategy can be the most effective without alienating either party.

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Conflict styles translate across different contexts (i.e., interpersonal, organizational, etc.), and your style may differ dependent on the context, the importance of the issue, and the relationship you have with the other party. You most likely would not use a collaborative approach to manage a conflict with a stranger over a seat on the bus. Which seat you sit in is of relatively little importance when compared to other conflicts you might have, and a continued relationship with the stranger is unlikely. You are more likely to use an accommodating approach, or maybe a competitive style. However, if you are in a conflict with your significant other over where to spend your vacation, the issue is more important and, presumably, you care about a continuing relationship. This may be a situation where you expend more energy to compromise or collaborate.

Conflict Strategies in Public Relations

Conflict management is a critical role of public relations professionals. As a public relations professional, you are charged with managing and maintaining the relationship between the organization and the public.

Organizational success depends on developing and maintaining relationships with strategic publics or stakeholders. Success

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by Shawn Wahl and Michelle Maresh-Fuehrer

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also depends on reinforcing the organizational reputation or brand equity in the minds of these important stakeholders. Conflicts among stakeholders and organizations require immediate attention and resolution (Plowman, Briggs & Huang, 2001, p. 301).

When conflict occurs between an organization and the public, timeliness and appropriateness of response are critical. In order to respond quickly and effectively, a PR professional must be armed with a “toolbox” of strategies, and understand the uses and implications of those strategies. Through their research on conflict resolution and a mixed-motive model of public relations, Plowman, Briggs and Huang (2001) identified nine strategies for conflict resolution. Similar to conflict styles, these strategies can be enacted through various tactics.

- **Contention:** a strategy that mimics the *competitive* style of conflict management, a contentious strategy is a win-lose approach wherein one party pushes to achieve its own goals at the expense of the goals of the other party.
- **Cooperation:** similar to the *collaborative* style, a cooperative strategy involves working together to create a solution that benefits both parties.
- **Accommodation:** a strategy in which one party forgoes its own goals in favor of the other party's goals.

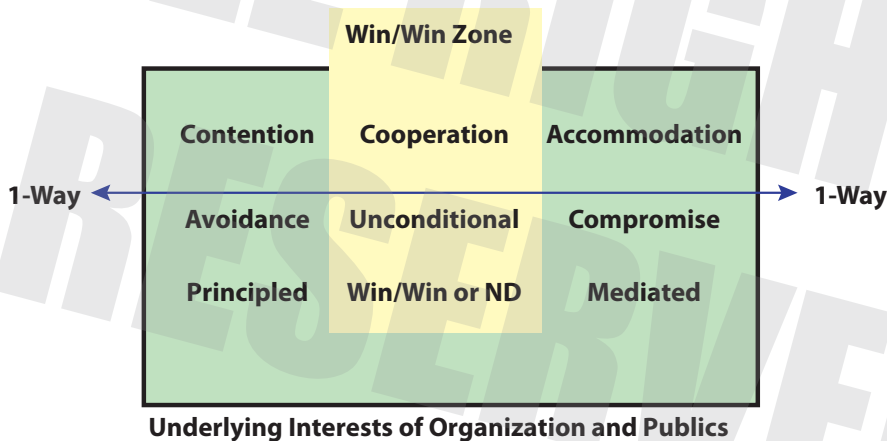
Having a third party mediate a dispute can offer an impartial perspective on the conflict.



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- **Avoidance:** one or both parties refuse to acknowledge the conflict or physically or psychologically exit the conflict.
- **Unconditional Constructive:** a strategy whereby one party creates guidelines to reconcile the strategic interests of both parties, whether the other party follows the guidelines or not.
- **Compromise:** a “fifty-fifty” strategy wherein each party achieves some of their interests at the loss of other interests.
- **Principled:** parties “stand on principle,” or are unwilling to negotiate due to the interest being a long-held core value or interest.
- **Win-Win or No Deal:** both parties either collaborate and create a resolution that meets all interests of both parties, or wait to reach agreement until a win-win deal can be made.
- **Mediated:** a strategy utilizing a neutral, disinterested third party to negotiate the dispute.

In his model, Plowman identifies a “Win/Win Zone.” Within this zone is where resolutions accounting for the interests of both parties occur. Outside of this zone, parties move to the left toward absolute advocacy or to the right toward absolute accommodation.





>> STRATEGIES FOR PROFESSIONAL SUCCESS

In this chapter, we learned about the different types of conflict as well as the different strategies available to us in resolving conflict effectively. It is critical to draw from your own personal experiences as well as the strategies outlined in this text. Writer Eric Dontigney offers five conflict management strategies that can be useful in your professional career.

Accommodating

The accommodating strategy essentially involves giving the opposing side what it wants. This strategy is particularly useful when one party wants to keep the peace and the issue is relatively minor. Allowing “casual Friday” for workers to dress informally is one such example.

Avoiding

An avoidance strategy attempts to put off conflict indefinitely. Those who try to avoid conflict frequently have low esteem or have a position of little power. One example could be the replacement of a popular (but unproductive) employee; hiring a more productive replacement could alleviate much of the conflict without necessarily having to place the issue out in the open.

Collaborating

The collaboration strategy involves integrating ideas set out by multiple people. The goal is to find a creative solution acceptable to everyone (Dontigney, 2014). Although useful, collaboration requires a significant time commitment not appropriate to all conflicts.

Compromising

A compromising strategy typically asks for both sides of a conflict to give up elements of their positions in order to establish an acceptable (if not agreeable) solution. This strategy is useful when both the parties in conflict hold relatively equivalent power.

Competing

The competitive strategy is a zero-sum game, where one side wins and the other loses. This strategy works best in a limited number of conflicts, such as emergency situations. This strategy can often cause ill-will among parties, and has limited effectiveness in the public relations arena.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Conflict is a natural part of human interaction. Conflict has many different causes, and our own experience of conflict is unique. As a public relations professional, you can expect to encounter conflict throughout your career with different individuals, organizations, publics, and the like. Conflict is not inherently bad; it can provide an opportunity for learning and growth. Your approach to conflict management can influence whether conflict has positive or negative implications for relational development and maintenance. There are many approaches from which you can choose. Understanding the causes and complexities of your conflict can enable you to choose the most effective approach in any conflict situation.

Now that you have finished reading this chapter you can

Define conflict and distinguish between conflict and crisis:

- ✓ Conflict is “an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from others in achieving their goals” (Hocker & Wilmot, 2013, p. 11).
- ✓ Relationships distinguish conflict from crisis. Conflict is unique because it is a *struggle between at least two interdependent parties*.

Identify the contexts in which conflict occurs in public relations:

- ✓ A public relations professional will experience conflict in a variety of situations, including within co-worker relationships, within and across work groups, and across organizations.

Explain how a public relations professional can act as a party to a conflict and/or a third-party mediator:

- ✓ When conflict emerges between an organization and the public relations firm, the firm and the public relations professional act as conflict parties. When conflict emerges between an organization represented by the public

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relations firm and critical stakeholders or publics, a public relations professional serves as a third-party mediator to the conflict.

Identify and understand different strategies for managing conflict in public relations:

- ✓ In contexts where the public relations professional acts as a party to a conflict, several strategies can be utilized to manage conflict. The style the professionals adapt is dependent on their concern for themselves and their concerns for others.
- ✓ It is important, when acting as a third-party mediator, that public relations professionals be familiar with and comfortable using several different strategies to meet the needs of the organizations and publics.

KEY TERMS



Advocacy: you meet the needs of your organization or a stakeholder group at the expense of the needs of the other sides. *p. 214*

Accommodation: the polar opposite of advocacy, you meet the needs of the public at the expense of the organization or stakeholder's needs. *p. 214*

Conflict: a communicatively expressed tension characterized by a struggle between two or more relationally dependent individuals or entities. *p. 215*

Conflict style: an overall response to conflict, made up of conflict tactics. *p. 227*

Conflict tactics: the individual moves or strategies you use in conflict that develop your overall conflict style. *p. 227*

Crisis: a major event with potential negative consequences for an organization, publics, products, reputations, and the like. *p. 215*

Expressed struggle: the communicative acknowledgement that a conflict exists. *p. 216*

Identity goals: goals concerned with maintaining face. *p. 219*

Interdependence: occurs when parties are dependent upon each other for the relationship to continue. *p. 216*

Interference: impeding the ability of an individual or entity to achieve goals. *p. 222*

Intergroup conflicts: conflicts among groups of people within an organization. *p. 223*

Interorganizational conflicts: disputes between two or more organizations. *p. 225*

Interpersonal conflicts: conflicts among relational partners. *p. 223*

Process goals: goals concerned with how communication and conflict will occur. *p. 220*

Relational goals: goals concerned with what goals relational partners have for a relationship.
p. 218

Scarce resources: a shortage of resources available to individuals or entities. *p. 221*

Topic goals: content goals, or goals that address wants of each party in conflict. *p. 218*

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How might interpersonal and intergroup conflict impact a public relations firm's ability to act as a third-party mediator between an organization and its publics?
2. How can social media be utilized in public relations to manage conflict?
3. Discuss the factors that influence conflict resolution strategy selection in various contexts.
4. When would using a contention strategy be most appropriate?
5. How could a conflict resolution professional act as a party to a conflict and a third-party mediator simultaneously with the same organization?

