

Conflict Concepts and Terminology

1) Healthy Conflict vs. Toxic Conflict

Conflict is not necessarily bad. There can be tendency to view conflict as something that should be eliminated. Conflict can be creative. It can lead to healthy competition. Sports and literature rely on conflict to create drama and draw attention. Without conflict there can be group think, complacency, unchallenged assumptions and stagnation.

Thus, the critical issue is not whether there is conflict but rather whether the conflict is healthy or toxic. This may not always be clear.

2) Conflict Constipation

Conflict avoidance can be a successful strategy for responding to conflict, if the conflict is likely to be resolved if it is ignored or if it would be better to engage in the conflict at a later time.

Example: Jin and Arvin are having a late night discussion. Jin notices that Arvin started to become irritated and express frustration at Jin’s comments. Rather than responding, Jin decides to politely excuse themselves to go to bed and sleep on it before deciding whether to raise the issue of Arwin’s frustration in the morning once Arwin is in a better mood.

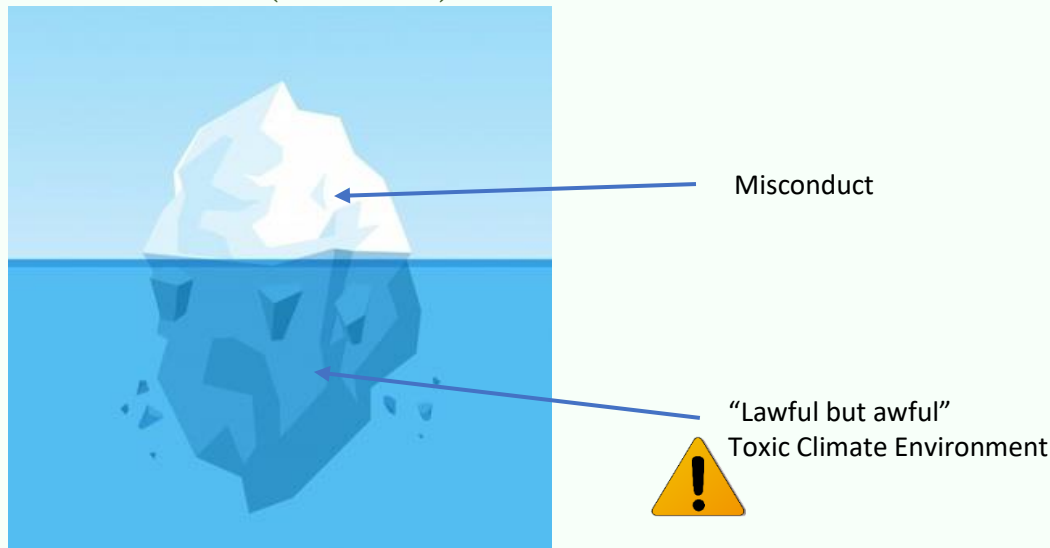
However, frequently conflict does not just go away but rather it festers and metastasizes if individuals or groups fail to address it. This leads to “conflict constipation” where the unwillingness of the group or individual to engage in healthy conflict becomes a bigger problem than the conflict itself.



3) Conflict Climate

Healthy Conflict Climate	“Lawful but awful” Toxic Conflict Environment	Misconduct
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Healthy Communication • Creative Collaboration • Respectful Disagreement • Friendly Competition • Disputes resolved quickly and proactively • Fair Treatment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular Communication Breakdowns • Conflict Avoidance • Favoritism • Email Tirades • Rivalries / Factions / Triangulation • Lingering Resentment • Back-biting / gossip • Micro-inequities • Angry Outbursts • Some Abusive Conduct (Abrasive behavior / Incivility / Bullying / Mobbing) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Returning a library book late • Smoking on Campus • Parking Violation • Retaliation • Plagiarism • Sexual Harassment • Illegal Discrimination • Some Abusive Conduct • Fraud • Violence

Conflict Climate (Continued)



4) Dimensions of Conflict

Frame 1) Binary Conflict

Often conflict can be framed in binary terms as a contest with a winner and a loser. This is like a sports match where one side triumphs over the other. This is rarely how conflict operates in most areas of our life.

Frame 2) Linear Conflict

Conflict can be framed as existing on a one-dimensional line. Now we've introduced the idea that the outcome can be mixed, and not all or nothing. However, conflict in this frame remains a zero-sum game where the benefit to one party comes at an equal cost to the other. Often we engage in political discourse along a linear framework and we can view distribution of money or other fixed resources along the linear frame.

Frame 3) Multi-dimensional Conflict

We can view conflict as falling on a two-dimensional plane where one dimension defines the cost/benefit to one party, and the other plane defines the cost/benefit to the other party. Viewed this way, we recognize the possibility of win-win scenarios where both parties at the same time. Healthy conflict can result in such win-win outcomes where both parties come out of a conflict engagement with increased mutual respect and value. Successfully negotiated purchases are such an example where both parties might initially haggle over a price but ultimately leave the exchange with something of greater value to them than what they gave away. This two-dimensional model also allows for lose-lose scenarios where both parties come away worse for the exchange. War is often a lose-lose game, where value is destroyed for most parties involved.

Conceptually, this two-dimensional model can easily be expanded into a multi-dimensional space by considering additional parties or by measuring different values for each party in multiple dimensions. For example, an employee in a workplace conflict might measure the financial value of their continued employment on one dimension and their dignity or mental health along another dimension.

Embracing this multi-dimensional framework of conflict opens possibilities of creative, integrative solutions.