

Facilitating Conflicts of Beliefs and Values Key Concepts

Understanding conflicts of beliefs and values

There are many types of conflict. Conflicts of beliefs and values are about issues where **compromise is not an option**. They are conflicts based upon *disagreement through which the parties involved perceive a **threat** to their needs, interests or concerns.*¹

The complexity of conflict

- Conflict can be **external** (with others) and **internal** (within ourselves), and often both take place simultaneously.
- Conflict produces **emotional, cognitive** and **physiological** responses that vary between participants.

Conflicts of beliefs

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a belief is “an acceptance that something exists or is true, especially **one without proof**.” Beliefs range **from deeply-held convictions to simple assumptions** about the world around us.

Beliefs are **assumed** and often not a result of deep reflection. This makes it difficult to access belief systems solely through **logic or argumentation**. A **golden rule of beliefs** is “No-one has a perfectly consistent belief system, and no-one likes being told this by someone else.” The truth is that beliefs can be **re-interpreted** and applied differently in different contexts. This means that in order to accept new concepts, they usually need to be **negotiated with current beliefs**.

We have three possible reactions when faced with an idea that conflicts with our current belief system: **Accept** the new belief, **reject** the new belief, or **re-interpret** our belief system to incorporate the new belief.

Conflicts of values

Values are defined as “principles or standards of behaviour; one’s judgement of what is important in life” (OED). Values are even **more deeply held** than beliefs and are **non-negotiable**. It is not possible to compromise on values like respect and honesty.

- Positive: Values are more easily **shared** than beliefs.
- Negative: If someone feels that values are **threatened**, he or she is very likely to respond with aggression or disengagement.

Many conflicts of values are treated as conflicts of beliefs. For example, often an argument about an issue of contention could be dealt with if both people felt that their beliefs was **heard and understood** by the other party.

Managing conflicts of beliefs and values

New concepts **may** be consistent with our belief system, but **must** be consistent with our value system.

Goal: Appeal to shared values to help people re-interpret wrong assumptions.

¹ Mayer, R. J. (1990). Conflict management: the courage to confront. Columbus, Ohio, USA: Battelle Press.

Personal and group boundaries

Managing conflicts of beliefs and values would be difficult enough as an academic exercise. It is much more complicated because of the **'invisible lines'** that make up our boundaries.

Boundaries are crossed when we **perceive** that our values are trampled on. How does this affect us? It all goes back to the brain.

Thinking brain – the 'neo-cortex'

- It can deal with **complexity**: like trying to imagine things from a completely different perspective, or seeing things are not black and white but are many shades of grey.
- It can do 'one the one hand, but on the other hand'; 'the advantages are... but there are disadvantages too such as...' and other kinds of balancing acts that require fine but important **distinctions**.

Emotional brain - 'the limbic system'

- Information comes in from our eyes and ears, and goes **straight to this part of the brain**. The emotional brain quickly and crudely matches it against its own past experiences - is this a threat? Is it a good thing I want?
- Depending on the result, the emotional brain **tags** the information with an **emotional label**. What happens next in our heads depends on this tag.
- If the situation is perceived as threatening or requiring some urgent, **instinctive**, response, then the emotional brain **stays in charge**. If not, the information can be **passed on** to the part of the brain that does the most sophisticated thinking.

The thinking brain does the re-interpreting of beliefs and accepting new ideas. The emotional brain just **rejects new information**. When we are very emotional, **we cannot even process information that contradicts us. The emotional brain won't let us**. As far as it is concerned, our actual survival may be at stake.

The key in facilitating conflicts of beliefs and values is helping people to access their thinking brain. This means being aware of trigger points and managing them carefully.

Facilitating conflicts

Facilitating conflicts of beliefs and values is both an **internal** and **external** process. We use different skills to simultaneously manage our internal conflicts and the external conflicts around us.

Putting it into practice

It's one thing to know. It is another to apply it when someone is **screaming at you**. Here are few tips to help you put this into practice:

- Before going into a difficult meeting or confrontation, **review the bank of skills** for managing internal and external conflicts.
- Practice **role plays of potential conflict situations** with other members of your team. This will help you to anticipate conflicts and prepare to manage them.
- **Share challenges** in managing conflicts with others on your team. Not only can they offer good advice, but acknowledging this level of interaction can strengthen positive relationships among the officer team.
- When a situation gets heated, **remind others** about the techniques. This can get people thinking and lower the emotional temperature.