onTrain

Online Training, the treasure within

C. Online Training
7. Management of
conflicts/challenges

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Content

Let's start

Every person has unique behavior, background, beliefs and opinions. Conflicts are a normal part of everyday interactions. The way we respond to conflicts can lead to a positive or negative response. If they are managed correctly, conflicts can become examples of positive communication.

What am I learning here and why?

In this chapter, you will learn the causes of conflict, how to handle conflict and you will understand the role of skills and abilities in conflict management and you will find out challenges associated with online education and solutions for these problems.

What content will I find here?

You will be able to describe different types of conflict. Also, you will identify the causes of the conflict and how to manage the conflict using different strategies. You will discover the positive aspects of conflict and you will be able to explain the role of communication in conflict management.

Types of conflict

Conflict is a strong disagreement between people, groups, and a disagreement between ideas, feelings, thoughts and interests.

"Conflict is a relationship in which each party perceives the goals, values, interests and behavior of the other as opposed to his own."[1]

Types of conflict:
1. **Substantive**: disagreement about ideas, goals
2. **Affective**: interpersonal disagreements, differences in personality/communication style
3. **Procedural**: disagreement about the process to achieve group goals

Conflict can take place **between individuals**, **groups** and **organizations**.
The conflict between individuals arises when one of the persons does not accept unspoken rules.
Conflict within the group arises when the actions of one or more of its members are not accepted. Conflict results from the competition of the group members. When a situation implies a competition, the success of one group member implies the failure of another. Conflict may not arise when the success of one member increases the chances of success of the other members of the group; this form of interaction is called cooperation. For example, if students

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[1] Burton J. (1990):Conflict: resolution and prevention. New York: St. Martins Press (1990)

are informed that their position in the group will determine the grade at the end of the course, then the group will become a competition group, because each will follow their purpose, and if they are informed that the group's performance will determine the grade at the end of the course, then the group will become a cooperative group.

Conflict can play a **positive** role for the people involved in it, or a **negative** role, degenerating into interpersonal disputes. A good collaboration in learning environments occurs when conflict situations are supported in positive way. Conflict can stimulate different thinking processes, like brainstorming.

Causes of conflict

The conflict is caused by the reactions to differences among the individuals and groups.

The causes of the conflict can be:
● Communication. If the ideas or feelings aren`t communicated right, the receptor of the message fills in the blanks, often resulting in incorrect assumptions;
● Change. For example, when new software has been included and it is not something that learners want to adopt;
● Stress. It is the major cause of conflict;
● The fundamental needs;
● Different values, for example people from different religions may have different values;
● Different perceptions, for example two people may perceive colour differently;
● Different interests, people with different concerns;
● Limited resources;
● Psychological needs.

Daniel Katz distinguished three categories of the sources of conflict[2]:
● Economic;
● Conflict of values;
● Power.

To understand and to manage a conflict you have to know its stages:
1. The preliminary stage – the conflict arises from a simple misunderstanding. Minor disagreements occur. If they aren`t controlled in time, they may degenerate into conflict.
2. Confrontation – the tension of the interaction is increased. The increase of the conflict is based on the rational solution at this stage.
3. The increase – usually involves hostile actions.
4. Polarization – the relations between the parties disintegrate. At this stage the conflict is destructive, the communications are tense.

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[2] Katz D. (1965): Nationalism and strategies of international conflict resolution. In H.C. Kelman (ed.), International behaviour: A social psychological analysis. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston (1965)

5. Enlargement – the parties involved in the conflict try to find support in allies.
6. Resolution – in this stage the parties end up resolving and ending the conflict.

Conflict management

People react differently to conflict situations. Alan Tidwell considers that the control of the conflict includes conflict management and conflict resolution[3]. In conflict management the negative aspects are minimized and in the conflict resolution they are eliminated.

Conflict is not very easy to control. Trainers need different skills and abilities to manage the conflict.
- Perception skills – the conflict is not about reality, it is about how people perceive reality. Empathy and self-evaluation are the abilities that help a person to realize his perceptions and to understand others.
- Emotional skills: understand emotions (for example anger, fear, sadness), eliminate anger from the conflict.
- Communicational skills: be specific, use simple words, don't assume things.
- Problem-solving skills: conflict analysis, collaborating, decision making.

There are five steps to follow in solving the conflict:
1. Define the problem. In every problem are three elements: the current situation, the goal, and the obstacles to achieving the goal. The stage is ending with creating a single sentence to summarize the problem.
2. Analyse the problem. The potential causes of the conflict are discussed. Create a problem question to lead to a solution.
3. Generate different solutions.
4. Evaluate the solutions.
5. Implement the solutions.

The main conflict resolution **strategies** to handle the conflict are:

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[3] Tidwell, A. (1998): Conflict Resolved, A critical Assessment of Conflict Resolution p. 188 (1998)

1. Avoidance

2. Accommodation

3. Competition

4. Compromise

5. Collaboration

1. **Avoidance**. Although the parties involved in the conflict acknowledge its existence, they don`t wish to confront. They ignore the conflict. It is suitable when the conflict is not important, when someone knows that the other one is hostile and maintaining the relationship is a priority of the moment or when there is a limited time in resolving the conflict situation.
2. **Accommodation**. To avoid disruption people are cooperative and give in to another`s demands. It can result in unresolved conflict.
3. **Competition**. The parties of the conflict act only in the direction of achieving their own goals. This strategy is a way of using any kind of power that seems appropriate to defend a position that is considered fair. It is used by determined people who go into a conflict with the idea of winning.
4. **Compromise**. The conflict parties find a mutually acceptable solution where everyone gives up a little and no one gets everything.
5. **Collaboration**. Every participant contributes to developing a win-win solution to the problem. The process may be longer and may not be practical when it is needed a quick solution.

In online environment conflict increases rapidly due the absence of visual cues. To prevent unnecessary conflict trainer should:
- provide netiquette guidelines: post relevant information to the discussion and check before to see if anyone has already asked it; keep your post short, check for spelling and grammar, don't write with capital letters; respect all opinions.
- allow learners to work through the conflict on their own; a trainer should intervene only when the conflicts intensify.
- look for signs of conflict in changes in the quality and quantity of posts.
- communicate privately with learners who are posting improper.

Unsolved conflicts may seriously decrease learner participation in online courses.

Online learning challenges

Online learning has benefits: reduced costs, time flexibility, but has also challenges, particular characteristics that can limit its success.

Challenges for the learner in an online environment are:

1. Technology. Online courses are using platforms that make it easy to participate, to communicate with the trainer and other learners. But there are compatibility issues, with browsers, or operating systems. The online course must have a simple script, without having to download documents or install additional programs, must have a chat service or a distinct subject on the forum for technical problems. Trainers should pay attention to the sound quality and try out the course on several operating systems.
2. Motivation. Learners must find the motivation to follow an online course, to remember their final goal, the reason why they enrolled in an online course.
3. Communication. In an online environment the written communication is essential. Check the messages and assessments for grammar and spelling errors.
4. Time management. Learners can take online courses when and where they like, but they should have self-discipline to avoid distractions and get their work done promptly. Trainers can set deadlines, a calendar indicating when the learners should have completed each part of the online course.
5. Learning community. It is important to create opportunities for learners to connect with each other by providing a forum. To form a community in an online environment, learners have to post regularly and interact with their trainer and other learners.

Example 1

Conflict situation

Trainer asks a question. When the question is addressed to the group it is normal to answer who knows the answer. But if the question is for a certain person and someone else answers before that person has a chance, this is a behaviour that generates a conflict.

Conflict resolution

Even if another person answers, the trainer should return to the person to whom he/she initially asked the question. Trainer recognizes the response from the other learner, but s/he asks again the question and must seek the views of the other learner.

Example 2

Using one of the five strategies to resolve a conflict:

"In a shop, the seller is busy with the coffee and does not have any intention of responding to the requests of the customers".

Conflict resolution through avoidance: customers leave, giving up shopping.

Conflict resolution through accommodation: buyers know most of the sellers are behaving the same way and they decide to wait for the seller to drink her/his coffee.

Answer to conflict by competition: buyers complain to the owner of the shop. The seller comes to the shelf and serves, but s/he is upset.

Compromise Response: the seller serves with her/his coffee next to her/him and s/he drinks when s/he has free moments.

Solution through collaboration, win-win: while the seller drinks coffee, customers are offered an interesting occupation, for example to examine small samples or allow them access to the shelf to choose their own products."

Exercises

Exercise 1: Complete the sentence

Find out how you react to conflict by completing the sentence "When I get into a conflict, I usually ……" and write your answer in the forum.

Exercise 2: Wisdom from another

1. Write down the conflicts of the week
2. Choose one conflict and resolve it by the strategy win-win/collaboration.

Summary

Conflict is a disagreement between two or more individuals and is inevitable in life. There are many types of conflict. It is important to understand the best ways to manage a conflict, because if it is poorly managed conflict impacts negatively upon learners and trainers.

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