

FUN

Conflict Resolution for the Workplace

SLIMO: Stuff Learning Is Made Of

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Fun Conflict Resolution for the Workplace

SLIMO: Stuff Learning Is Made Of

Comes with all the tools you need except the ones you hired!

This is a hands-on how-to manual for creating a conflict resolution model for your organization that works.

It's fun.

It's usable.

It will make life in the office a whole lot better.

And it comes with everything you need . . . except your staff and conflicts!

by Margaret Rose-Jackson M.S.W. R.S.W. LL.M. (ADR)



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Index

Author's Note	5
The Conflict Resolution Journey: Yes? No? Maybe!	7
Understanding Organizational Conflict and Analysis	9
Investigate the Conflict, Then Build the Model	15
The Organizational Conflict	23
From the Model to the Conflict	25
Strengths and Weaknesses of the Blended Model	29
Conclusion and Next Steps	31
Conflict Resolution Design Team Process Steps	35
Conflict Resolution Training Model: Staff Training Process	39
Tools and Forms for All Occasions	45
Policy Sample	53
Staff Conflict Comfort Survey Forms	55
SLIMO Evaluation Form for Participants	59
SLIMO Evaluation Form for Coaches/Neutral Parties	63
Request for a SLIMO Conversation Card	67
SLIMO Rules	69
Stuff Learning Is Made of (SLIMO) Questionnaire	71
Bibliography	73

Author's Note

In making the decision to go ahead with publishing this book, I spent a lot of thought and time on the title. From the rumblings of gossip to full-blown conflicts, we all deal with workplace conflict every day, and it's frustrating. There are days when gossip and conflict makes us feel like we have been wedged in a corner. Hence, this book comes with all the tools you need so you can learn to get out of that position and be better for it, also. Who thought conflict could do that for you?

I believe in being able to laugh at yourself with others, and with others at themselves. Conflict is here to stay, so let's make it work for us all. I can honestly say that there has been a very impressive positive impact on my agency since the staff group was trained in this program. The staff enjoyed the learning and was surprised at their own personal experiences in the process. If we don't learn a thing from conflict, what's the point?

As an employer, I have found it valuable to have a model for dealing with the gossipers in the office who can turn the environment into a dark and uncomfortable place. It is wonderful to have the ability to bring the discussions to the forefront and away from the water cooler. So, here's to the staff; they make it ever interesting

and exciting to be an employer. Without them, we would all be in a very different kind of conflict.

The Conflict Resolution Journey: Yes? No? Maybe!

The decision to begin any new journey should start with information to base the decisions upon. This manual provides a good overview of conflict in the organization, and it attempts to enhance understanding of the literature from a logical and practical standpoint. The manual demonstrates the application of one model for understanding and analyzing conflict in an organization.

The decision to create a manual to deal with conflict in an organization is driven by the day-to-day conflicts seen in an organization. Often, minor conflicts go unaddressed and cause additional, deeply destructive conflicts. It is important to learn to deal with conflict and to have a process to learn from it and resolve it, because life is fraught with conflict. We experience conflict in every environment: work, home, community, and even ourselves in the form of internal conflict. People are generally not very happy with the idea of conflict. It brings to mind problems, discomfort, and an unsettled feeling. People report little confidence in handling conflict and, in fact, in many cases, would prefer to avoid it.¹

¹Furlong, Gary T., *The Conflict Resolution Toolbox* (Mississauga, Ontario: John Wiley & Sons Canada, Ltd., 2005), 2.

This manual sets out information about organizational conflict and offers a set of unique tools and ideas, along with a model and process, to make sense of conflict in any organization. It is not meant to be static; it is meant to be added to, changed, and revised on an ongoing basis. Making the decision to have such a process in an organization requires some time up front, especially if you are starting from scratch. It is hoped that the work that has gone into this manual will provide the foundation for others so they can benefit from resolutions in situations that may otherwise have been left broken.

Understanding Organizational Conflict and Analysis

What is conflict? Conflict is fluid and organic; it's a signal that someone is dissatisfied, that a storm is brewing, and the weather is about to shift.² Conflict is amorphous and intangible.³ Conflict is about "personal agendas, tensions between organizations, good and bad relationships between individuals, and a history of previous encounters that color current activities."⁴ Conflict is ongoing; it is unacknowledged; it is based on competing interests between two or more parties; it is the adherence to and belief that the position one party holds is the right and true position and the other party is wrong. Ury states that conflict is inevitable; it cannot be prevented nor should it be prevented.⁵ Conflict is something that transpires

²Costantino, Cathy A. and Christina Sickles Merchant, *Designing Conflict Management Systems: A Guide to Creating Productive and Healthy Organizations* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996), preface.

³Ibid., 5.

⁴Carpenter, Susan L. and W. J. D. Kennedy, "Analyzing the Conflict: Chapter Four," in *Managing Public Disputes: A Practical Guide to Handling Conflict and Reaching Agreement*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1988), 71.

⁵Costantino, Cathy A. and Christina Sickles Merchant, *Designing Conflict Management Systems: A Guide to Creating Productive and Healthy Organizations* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996).

between parties over a period of time; it is, therefore, a process. It is a process that occurs between people and is both created and resolved between people.⁶

Organizational conflict is defined as “an expression of dissatisfaction or disagreement with an interaction, process, product, or service. Someone or some group is unhappy with someone or something else. This dissatisfaction can result from multiple factors: differing expectations, competing goals, conflicting interests, confusing communications, or unsatisfactory interpersonal relations.”⁷

Organizational conflicts can be situation or context specific. The differences in conflict in an organization as opposed to a personal relationship conflict are the multi-layer causal possibilities within the organization. This is not just about two parties disagreeing on an issue, perceptually or otherwise; it is more systemic than that. Organizational conflict can begin to show up in many different ways in an organization: low morale, sabotage of relationships with stakeholders by a disgruntled employee, lack of productivity, or even competition and “turf wars” between employees. Unmanaged conflict will subtly take many forms and begin to show its existence through a generally unhappy, less productive staff group.⁸

Under the two broad categories of fight or flight, Costantino and Merchant talk about the different types of responses an organization may have to the existence of conflict. Fight responses may be arrogant, as if managers are “above it all” and choose to assist on behalf of, not with, disputants. Better yet is the “bulldozer

⁶Ibid.

⁷Costantino, Cathy A. and Christina Sickles Merchant, *Designing Conflict Management Systems: A Guide to Creating Productive and Healthy Organizations* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996), 4.

⁸Ibid.

approach,” because management can outspend, out-lawyer, and outmaneuver the frontline staff population.⁹ The flight responses include denial, avoidance, and accommodation, which can result in temporary fixes such as removing or reassigning a person, removing a program component, ignoring a situation, or keeping it secret. As Costantino and Merchant point out, and I strongly agree, we need not disregard the fact that some organizations and individuals benefit from the conflict and therefore put energy into keeping the chaos of the whitewater rapids going.¹⁰

It is worth noting that the theory—the “higher thinking”—about conflict, its causes, and its principles is a form of abstract investigation, which does not give the practitioner a formal tool to analyze the conflict. Theory only enables us to recognize that which is being observed or experienced as conflict.¹¹

The analysis of the conflict, the model, and therefore the approach to the conflict, forms the container for the conflict. Fluid needs a container or it simply flows, spreads further, and dissipates, touching everything in its path. The same applies to conflict. A dispute, then, “is the product of the unresolved conflict.”¹² The analysis and model of choice places the conflict in a container that allows dissection and reorganization of the layers, allowing some to fall away and the core to be uncovered. This process is intrusive in that it looks at the facts, values, and interests of individuals. It peels the onion to the issues that are beneath the surface: potentially more emotional and rooted in the history of the individuals. Such an

⁹Ibid., 7–9.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Furlong, Gary T., *The Conflict Resolution Toolbox* (Mississauga, Ontario: John Wiley & Sons Canada, Ltd., 2005), 7.

¹²Ibid., 5.

intrusive process must be done in a place of safety, making the model or resolution design essential, as it is created to address or not address specific types of information. Nurtured through understanding and learning for all of the parties, the resolution must be placed in a new container that is understood and accessible to all parties. The conflict then becomes a place of learning that will allow the parties to move forward.¹³

Anything that is truly fluid and organic,¹⁴ as described above, is able to take different forms and shapes with no two ever being exactly the same. Conflict is as unique as the people and organizations that experience it. It therefore becomes essential to begin any process of understanding with a mechanism that can break down and deposit the pieces of conflict into various compartments for processing, understanding, and analyzing.

Costantino and Merchant talk about assessing the culture of the conflict, how many conflicts there are, and any patterns of specific issues; for example, is there a particular area of the organization or a particular supervisor that always has similar conflicts?¹⁵ The interests-oriented system of Ury, Brett, and Goldberg additionally puts the focus on interests and communication assisted through loop-backs (turning back from a power or rights-based process to a more interest-based negotiation). Through this process, the sequence flow begins, at low cost to the organization and the participants, and maintains an interest-based focus. It further considers motivation, skills, and resources as essential components to create a successful design, all of which speak to and support “buy-

¹³ Stone, Douglas, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen, *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most* (London, England: Penguin Books, 2000).

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid.

in” by the organization as a whole. The communication and flow of information provide a sense of safety to the process by balancing some of the power issues.¹⁶

Ury, Brett, and Goldberg include in their discussion of conflict and design the importance of adopting a problem-solving attitude,¹⁷ which requires a shift in culture for many organizations. If the organization has the flight-oriented attitude that Costantino and Merchant describe, then developing a problem-solving attitude will require a huge shift in thinking, beginning with recognizing that problems exist.¹⁸ If, on the other hand, the organization has a fight-oriented attitude, a different set of adjustments will be needed.

Given the complexity of the subtle pieces involved, it becomes clear why a model, a designed and organized approach to managing conflict, is so essential. The creation of such a design must begin with the unique pieces of the specific organization and its disputants if it is to be effective for that organization.

¹⁶Ury, William, Jeanne Brett, and Stephen B. Goldberg, *Getting Disputes Resolved: Designing Systems to Cut the Costs of Conflict* (San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass, 1988).

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Costantino, C. A., and Merchant, C. Sickles., *Designing Conflict Management Systems: A Guide to Creating Productive and Healthy Organizations* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996).

Investigate the Conflict, Then Build the Model

Any effective investigative process must begin with what one already knows about the situation. One must take note of who the primary parties are, what may be at stake for the individuals and the organization, and what and who is missing from the group.¹⁹ One must ask what the main interests are for the individuals involved, and identify which interests are shared and which are different. It is also important to consider the costs involved in the conflict, both financial and personal.²⁰

As part of the process, one must collect detailed information about the conflict, people, and current procedures involved, all of which may have added fuel to the fire. Ury, Brett, and Goldberg state that there are three main questions to be answered in a dispute resolution diagnosis: “What are the current and recent issues in dispute?” “How are disputes being handled?” and “Why are

¹⁹Carpenter, S. L., and Kennedy, W. J. D., “Analyzing the conflict” Chapter four,” in *Managing Public Disputes: A Practical Guide to Handling Conflict and Reaching Agreements*, 71–91 (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1988).

²⁰Ury, W., Brett, J., and Goldberg, S. B., *Getting Disputes Resolved: Designing Systems to Cut the Costs of Conflict*. (San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass, 1988), 21.

particular procedures being used and not others?”²¹ One must observe, listen to, and interview individuals in order to gain further insight into the situation from a variety of perspectives. It is important when doing so to listen to the tone and cadence of the conversations, as these will add detail to the spoken information. The person gathering the information needs to remain impartial and gather the facts without “influence.”²²

To choose a model for conflict resolution processes, it is essential to consider the model’s strengths and weaknesses and its applicability to the type of conflict. This is why it is critical to understand the conflict details well before beginning model selection and system design. It is worth noting that all models have value. All models, however, are not created “equal” for use in every situation; since conflict happens in living systems, it is not a case of “one size fits all.”

Much can be learned from the application of a model to a past conflict. The review of that past process through a new model assists in teasing out some of the details of the processes that are already in place and those that should or could be in place.

In Gary Furlong’s book *The Conflict Resolution Toolbox*, one such tool is the Boundary Model. The Boundary Model was developed by Larry Prevost as part of his dissertation and is noted for its usefulness in situations where the relationships will be ongoing. Conflict, according to the Boundary Model, is “caused when a boundary and its norms are challenged, threatened, or

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid.

circumvented.”²³ Conflict in physical terms is that sense and feeling of discomfort when something happens that does not fit with our values or what we consider to be the norms in a given situation.

The Boundary Model was selected as a learning tool because it is useful to many workplace conflicts. Furlong’s book diagnostically describes the Boundary Model as “reasonably deep”; therefore, it is useful in diagnosing the potential causes of the conflict and offers clear ideas for intervention, making it strategically useful. The model is described as having its greatest strength in its applicability to situations where a relationship at issue will continue.²⁴

The Boundary Model views conflict through the specific lens of boundaries. Boundaries exist in many forms in the workplace and can be very complex. They involve both organizational boundaries, such as policies and laws (human rights), and personal boundaries, such as friendships outside of the workplace (romantic and other). The boundaries in the workplace can also be less tangible than, for example, policies and laws. For instance, the norms of the workplace also deserve consideration and clearly play a very important role in the environment of the workplace on a day-to-day basis.²⁵

The Boundary Model describes boundaries in four key areas. First, the defined standards for behavior; these are the limits in the workplace. Policy and procedures create some formal parameters within the environment and provide the container for the acceptable limits of behaviors.²⁶ Policy, and particularly procedures, should be reviewed carefully because they can define the existence or lack

²³Furlong, G. T., *The Conflict Resolution Toolbox* (Mississauga, Ontario: John Wiley & Sons Canada, Ltd., 2005), 91.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 100.

²⁵*Ibid.*

²⁶*Ibid.*, 89–90.

thereof of the feedback loops within an organization between staffing departments (such as how information is disseminated and decisions are made) described by Ury, Brett, and Goldberg.²⁷ Jurisdiction and legitimacy, the second key area, must exist if the boundaries are to survive.²⁸ In the workplace, this jurisdiction would be the laws and standards of practice for an industry, such as accreditation standards, upon which the policy is based and from which it draws its legitimacy. Authority and enforcement is the third key area, created and supported by managers, supervisors, executive directors, and boards of directors in the workplace. However, minor conflicts related to boundary norms being pushed often do not come to the attention of supervisors. In other cases supervisors are aware of conflicts but are restricted in their intervention abilities due to some of the jurisdiction or legitimacy issues that exist, such as a collective agreement with a Union where strict guidelines must be adhered to.

The fourth key boundary element within an organization is that of norms. Norms are described as a degree of tolerance or the allowable variance or drift from the boundary.²⁹ A boundary norm for a children's mental health office may be that staff have their client discharge reports completed within the same month that the client left the agency. The accepted norm of being within five days of that boundary shows the allowable variance or drift from the jurisdiction (policy in this case).³⁰ This occasionally may be stretched

²⁷Ury, W., Brett, J., and Goldberg, S. B., *Getting Disputes Resolved: Designing Systems to Cut the Costs of Conflict*. (San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass, 1988).

²⁸Furlong, G. T., *The Conflict Resolution Toolbox* (Mississauga, Ontario: John Wiley & Sons Canada, Ltd., 2005).

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid.

a day or two without any comment, however, if it happened routinely that a particular staff was always three to five days beyond the norm in finalizing the discharge report, it would exceed the established degree of boundary variance for the workplace. The root of a conflict has just been created, which may expand if others begin to follow this newly created boundary. Conflict requires an intervention in order to resolve it, and not intervening threatens the existence of the boundary.³¹

Norms are hard to define and generally are not written into policy, though they are within the realm of acceptable practice.³² It is often not until the behavior has clearly eroded the boundary of acceptable norms that it becomes uncomfortable. One often sees in retrospect that the eroded norm has been established for a long period of time, perhaps unnoticed by others. Alternatively, the behavior could have been noticed but gone unaddressed due to discomfort in broaching the topic.

One area the Boundary Model does not assist with is the emotional arena. Emotions run high in these situations, particularly where boundaries have been crossed on the personal level. This model does not help break apart the issues and determine which issues should be addressed and which left alone. It may be useful to add another piece to the Boundary Model in which emotional and psychological interests would be considered and identified, if for no other reason than to avoid them.³³

The Triangle of Satisfaction Model, which was created by

³¹Ibid.

³²Ibid., 94–95.

³³Ibid.

Christopher Moore and is reproduced in Furlong's book,³⁴ breaks conflicts into three domains: the result or substantive interests, which are the most tangible, such as an amount of money to be gained; the process or procedural interests, which are the how of the process, who is involved, and who will make the first offer; and the emotion and psychological interests.³⁵ One can learn from applying this model. By identifying the emotional interests, one can listen to, acknowledge, and move forward from them. The Triangle of Satisfaction Model can provide a useful addition to the Boundary Model by identifying and acknowledging the emotional issues while avoiding getting immersed in them. The conflict will not be resolved through emotions, but emotions need to be acknowledged and protected so that other interests can be addressed and move the conflict toward resolution.³⁶

It is very helpful to identify the emotional interests of the staff and bring them to the fore so the supervisors do not get caught up in them to their detriment and to the detriment of the organization. The arena of feelings is much more elusive, hard to target or pin down. For this reason, an additional column to the Boundary Model is useful for capturing the emotional interests of the parties that require acknowledging.

Another piece worth noting here is a potential weakness of the Boundary Model. This model does not acknowledge the inability to deal with some issues due to jurisdiction, such as collective agreements within agencies. It becomes very difficult to manage some issues within an organization if there has already been a written formal complaint by a staff member. In this situation, managing

³⁴C. Moore, *The Mediation Process* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003).

³⁵*Ibid.*, 61–88.

³⁶*Ibid.*

conflicts can become very legalistic. Staff members who have been exposed to comments and behaviors that, when viewed in isolation are minor but are evidence of a more pervasive problem when viewed collectively, feel as if they are overreacting by submitting a formal complaint that requires the intervention of supervisors. As a result, they often choose to do nothing. In analyzing this further, it is fair to say that when this model is applied to a past conflict situation, it clearly shows that intervention at an earlier stage is missing because it shows it as such. That is one of the strengths of the model. The model's utility is also in its ability to be used to learn from in order not to repeat the same mistakes and to be proactive in future intervention strategies.

Within an organization, all employees actually have the authority to intervene, as they all have the right, supported by policy, to expect certain standards within the workplace. Employees, however, often experience discomfort in intervening. This speaks to several important aspects of an organization, not the least of which may be a lack of conflict-management skills. Organizations that are not functioning optimally may require an infusion of supports to create and maintain change. For instance, a floundering organization may require a process design created with buy-in from the entire organization providing legitimate protection through policy from threats of discipline related to the resolution of conflicts. In short, employees need to know that they are permitted to resolve conflicts appropriately without fear of repercussions. The creation of a conflict process design requires training in the workplace to increase comfort and confidence in all staff. Two things are needed to successfully make this shift: practice and a champion who models the change and demonstrates successful interventions. To develop a culture that views conflict as a learning tool/experience requires a number of things, including a shift to understanding the language

of conflict as positive not negative and a communication loop-back to fully assess the organization with the use of a model before beginning the specific conflict resolution design process.

While the Boundary Model and Triangle of Satisfaction are very useful, models generally will run into limitations based on the openness, or lack thereof, of the organization that potentially might use it. This, therefore, raises the need for provision within organizations for more formal systems of conflict resolution and management.³⁷ This need will be discussed further in the following chapter with an analysis of a fictitious conflict in the workplace using an expanded version of the Boundary Model combined with the Triangle of Satisfaction with the additional column that reflects limits/boundaries imposed by legalistic bounds, such as collective agreements, laws, and policies.

³⁷ Stone, Douglas, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen, *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most* (London, England: Penguin Books, 2000).

The Organizational Conflict

The following imaginary conflict was created with typical work situations in mind. Conflicts like this one can have a profound impact on the whole organization and take a great deal of time to manage; however, a great deal can be learned from them when they are handled with an effective model.

This conflict is about a new staff member in the agency. The staff member begins work in the organization and is on a six-month probationary period, which is in compliance with policy and the collective agreement. The staff member runs into some difficulties—a variety of legitimate issues—that are causing an attendance problem. The supervisor's response is supportive and understanding. This sort of problem continues for a period of time, quite legitimate, but problematic, and it is now affecting that staff member's work completion.

To complicate matters, the new staff member is now developing an attitude and is generally rude to staff members overall. No one addresses this rudeness for a period of time, so it continues and, in fact, escalates. The issues of being rude and behaving outside of the norm of expected behavior are raised by the supervisor. An attitude shift occurs and looks promising. The supervisor and other staff begin to feel more comfortable around the new staff member. A

week after this improvement, a couple of staff members complain to their supervisor about the new staff member. This time, the complaint is about devaluing and negative comments about the organization and supervisor. The staff who report this don't want anyone to do anything, and they are not comfortable dealing with it.

Despite the fact that the new staff member's behavior has already been addressed by a supervisor, it continues and once again escalates. Time has been spent focusing on the behavior and taking staff complaints, and in the meantime, work is not being completed and has gone unnoticed. The staff member does not meet the requirements of probation and is let go.

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