

Conflict and Culture

1. How are we to understand conflict? One model for analyzing the cultural influences on conflict and negotiation is given below (Nadler, Nadler, and Broome, "Culture and the Management of Conflict Situations", pp. 91-109):

Perspectives toward Conflict	Orientations toward conflict	How is conflict viewed by the participants? What are appropriate goals of conflict, and what are acceptable rules of play in the conflict? Is conflict a negative thing that must be avoided (China), a positive thing to be embraced (US), or a neutral thing that can have either positive or negative results (France)?
	Orientations toward conflict resolution	Is resolution viewed as "winner-take-all", can both sides "win" or "lose" (American), must there always be a "loser" (Chinese)? Is there room for compromise, and, if so, what rules govern the process of reaching a compromise (personal honor (Mexico), group consensus (Japan), status (Africa), efficiency (US), etc.)?
	Criteria for resolution	Is resolution to be viewed as final or never-ending (China)? How are we to know when resolution is reached? Is it when one side is satisfied, when both are satisfied, or more simply when open confrontation ceases?
Personal Constructs	Fairness	What negotiation outcomes constitute a proper balance of conflicting interests to us? When I compare what I got with what the other got, how do I decide if the outcome is "fair"? Is my decision based on an equality split (50-50), an equity split (input-output ratios are equal; US), a responsibility split (personal need is the criterion for fairness; China) or some reciprocity arrangement?
	Trust	To what extent can I trust the other person, and how have I determined my answer to this? What do I require as a demonstration of trust (e.g., a signed contract (US), a handshake, mutual understanding and social trust (Japan), participation with the "in" group (Greece))?
	Power	What are the indicators as to who has power in the conflict setting? Is it age (Japanese and African), material resources (US), family or other connections (Greece), social class (France), location (China) or something else? In the organizational setting, who has power? Is it located solely with the person at the top (Mexico), or distributed down the chain of command (US)?
Message Strategies	Threats and promises	All cultures appear to use threats and promises (note the prevalence of both in the Bible). By what system of rules is something interpreted as a threat or a promise? How do we assess the danger level of a threat or the ability of the promisor to meet the promise? How do we determine what is appropriate or inappropriate in threats and promises?
	Use of time	How is time viewed and subsequently used in the conflict process? What are appropriate and inappropriate "waiting" periods and "delays"?
	Decision-making style	Are decisions based on "hard facts" and linear logical reasoning, or on personal relationships and intuition? Does the decision-maker initiate on behalf of the community or reflect previously discerned community consensus? What room (if any) is there for new initiatives?
	Communication style	To what extent do formal rules apply in the conflict process? Are these rules in a high or low context framework?

2. To expand on the previous chart, we examine in more detail how contextuality affects conflict (adapted from Ting-Toomey, "Conflict and Culture", p. 82; now being tested and written up in the literature; see Chua and Gudykunst "Conflict Resolution")?

Low Context (LC)	Key Questions	High Context (HC)
Instrumental-oriented: dichotomy between conflict and conflict parties; analytic, linear logic used	WHY?	Expressive-oriented: integration of conflict and conflict parties; expressive logic used
Instrumental: the issues are at stake, not the people. Marked by opposing practices or goals. Does not matter how the conflict is resolved, as long as it is done and the "best" solution is found.	Why conflict? How? Who? How to resolve?	Expressive: issues and people cannot be separated; the management and resolution is as important as the resolution
Violations of individual expectations create conflict potentials (because an LC culture is individualistic-oriented with low collective normative expectations)	WHEN?	Violations of collective expectations create conflict potentials (because an HC culture is group-oriented with high collective normative expectations)
There is a higher conflict potential because individual expectations can vary widely. However, the consequences of conflict are not as significant as in HC settings. Two LC people can engage in conflict without affecting the larger society, which is far more difficult to do in HC settings.	When? Under what conditions? How? Who? How to resolve?	There is less potential for conflict for those from within the HC culture because all follow the collective expectations. When it comes, however, outsiders' violations are more obvious to the whole culture than in LC contexts (which are against individuals).
Revelment; direct, confrontational attitude oriented	WHAT?	Concealment; indirect, nonconfrontational attitude oriented
Opposing parties are more likely to directly confront each other. Bringing things out into the open is valued. (because of the tensions it brings) will serve as a heuristic for both parties to press for resolution and early closure.	What? What is the attitude toward conflict? What is the attitude toward resolution?	Focus is on implicit, not explicit codes for expressing the conflict. The actual communication will be expended to ensure that non verbal expectations are not violated. Correct indirect speech is used to communicate. The actual conflict is concealed so no one loses face.
Explicit communication codes; line-logic style (from the mind); open, direct strategies	HOW?	Implicit communication codes; point-logic style (from the heart); ambiguous, indirect strategies
Individuals can fight and scream at each other over a task-oriented point and yet be able to remain friends afterwards. They appreciate themselves on not "beating around the bush" and dealing directly with the issues at hand. They idealize separating the sin from the sinner.	How? How to resolve? Who? How to resolve?	The issues involved cannot be separated from the people who are involved. To openly disagree with someone is a severe blow and an embarrassment to both sides to lose face. The ability to artfully approach the conflict is appreciated and approved.

3. Two major assumptions of conflict and culture:
- Conflict and culture cannot be separated (that, by the way, is a high context approach to conflict). Culture, the conceptual paradigm in which all behaviors originate, dictates how conflict can be managed, interpreted, and resolved.
 - Conflict is perceived as functional when it upholds the criteria of productivity, stability, and harmony.
4. What stages may be employed? The following stages are derived from the North American context. Note how they may be perceived in other contexts (adapted from Feldman, "A Taxonomy", p. 174):

Aspects of Conflict Management in Low Context Settings			Relationships in High Context Settings in Relation to the Strategies
Goal	Conflict Resolution Strategy	Appropriate Situations	
AVOIDANCE Attempt to keep the conflict from coming into the open.	Ignoring the conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> When the issue is trivial When the issue is symptomatic of more basic, pressing problems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> LC people will tend to see this as the main strategy used in HC settings, since no overt LC indications will be given of the conflict This is only the surface level--much more is going on underneath the surface!
	Imposing a solution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> When quick, decisive action is needed When unpopular decisions must be made, and consensus among the group appears very unlikely 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In HC settings consensus may be the only means of survival. When a solution is imposed, all will agree with it (at face value) to maintain the harmony
DEFUSION Keep the conflict in abeyance and to 'cool' the emotions of the parties involved.	Smoothing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As a stop-gap measure to let people cool down and regain their perspective When the conflict concerns nonwork issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As with ignoring the conflict, LC people will tend to see this as another primary HC strategy
	Focusing on higher goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> When there is a mutually important goal that neither group can achieve without the cooperation of the other When the survival or success of the total organization is in jeopardy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The higher goal in the HC context is community--the bottom line tends to be measured more in harmony among the groups than in productivity or dollars.
CONTAINMENT Allow some conflict to surface, but tightly control which issues are discussed and the manner in which they are discussed.	Representatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Before the groups' positions become fixed and public When each side is represented by groups of representatives rather than by one spokesperson 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This is better established as a conflict resolution strategy in HC cultures, and can be used there with greater success than in individualistic LC settings, especially with competent mediators.
	Structuring the interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> When previous attempts to openly discuss conflict issues led to conflict escalation rather than to problem solution When a respected third party is available to provide structure and serve as a mediator 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This is the norm in some HC cultures (e.g., Japan), but there will be no overt list of formal rules that the outsider will be able to find.
	Bargaining	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> When the two groups have relatively equal power When there are several acceptable, alternative solutions that both parties are willing to consider 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> HC cultures allow for this, but within their HC systems. Strategies for coming to a bargaining session, how the representatives act, what authority they have, how to keep face, etc. will all be important.
CONFRONTATION Designed to uncover all the issues of the conflict and to try to find a mutually satisfactory solution.	Problem solving	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> When there is a minimum level of trust between the groups and there is no pressure for a quick solution When the organization can benefit from merging the different perspectives and insights of both groups in making key decisions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Open confrontation will be avoided in HC cultures--the facilitator of a problem solving approach will have to take into account the fact that an overt reference to strong differences will produce different reactions in HC cultures than in LC cultures. The HC rule of thumb: don't try to separate people from problems!

Aspects of Conflict Management in Low Context Settings			Relationships in High Context Settings in Relation to the Strategies
Goal of Strategy	Conflict Resolution Strategy	Appropriate Situations	
	Organizational redesign	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When the sources of conflict result from the coordination of work • Self-contained work groups are most appropriate when the work easily can be divided into clear project responsibilities; lateral relationships are more appropriate when activities require much interdepartmental coordination but do not clearly lie within any one department's responsibilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This would be very tricky in an HC setting, as restructuring of the organization would carry social implications in addition to work implications.