What Is Conflict?

The word *conflict* is often used to describe a wide range of disagreements—everything from minor squabbles to dysfunctional relationships to all-out war. At its core, conflict is disharmony, dissension, division, and discord between people, interests, or ideas. Conflict is also natural, and inherent to the human experience. Where there are people, there will be conflict.

Individuals perceive conflict differently, and those differences can make managing conflict extremely difficult. What to one person is a full-scale battle to another person is an opportunity to discuss divergent views. One person may define a poor relationship as conflict, but someone else may see the same relationship as difficult but not unusual—just what's expected when working with people who hold different perspectives. These disparate views about conflict can be even more disconcerting when the conflict is between you and your boss.

Why Managing Conflict Is Important

Since 1983 the Center for Creative Leadership has conducted research on derailment—contrasting those people who make it to the top with people who were once successful but in the end were demoted, fired, or sidelined. In the research, successful managers were described as those who seek out, build, and maintain effective relationships with others. They listen—willingly, actively, and patiently. They willingly receive feedback and effectively respond to it. They support others' ideas. They perform as promised and

The Look of Conflict

In a large manufacturing company, the vice president of operations had ten direct reports. She got along well with eight of the ten. Two of her reports, however, proved difficult to work with. From her perspective, she felt they were threatened by the changes she had instituted since taking her position because both employees were "old timers." She also knew that they socialized together, and she thought this tended to encourage their mutual negativity. Despite the difficulties, she didn't regard her interactions with these two reports as a "conflict" situation. In her mind, conflicts resulted from personality clashes, not employee resistance. In this case she saw her direct reports as resisting change, and she saw herself as responsible for gaining their commitment.

The two direct reports, the director of quality and the director of manufacturing, described their relationship with the vice president as conflicted. From their perspective, every time they tried to disagree with their less experienced boss, she shut them down. They felt very frustrated. They thought they had tried to get through to her on numerous occasions, and had even talked about how unreceptive she was to their ideas. Because they saw the relationship as filled with conflict, they put more time and emotional energy into fixing the relationship than their boss did. This inequity caused even greater frustration and eventually stopped communication up the chain from director to vice president.

The difference in how the vice president and the directors defined conflict and how they saw their relationship exacerbated all of these problems. Often how individuals define conflict influences how they approach such a relationship. At the same time, each person in the relationship judges that approach based on his or her own view of conflict.

maintain commitments. Derailed managers were described as disconnected, disagreeable, dictatorial, and divisive. They mishandled interpersonal relationships. Specific examples of their ineffective relationships include having an unresolved interpersonal conflict with a boss and showing unprofessional behavior related to a disagreement with upper management.

Conflict with your boss doesn't have to lead to derailment if you make the effort to effectively manage the situation. When you appropriately manage conflict, positive consequences can result. It can lead to a more productive working relationship between you and your boss that:

Increases effort. In many ways, we need our differences to help us clarify our own positions and better understand others. The chaos and confusion that naturally surrounds a search for clarity can actually energize the efforts of all.

Airs feelings. Instead of allowing resentment to build, feelings are dealt with openly.

Leads to better decision making. More information leads to better decisions, even if during a conflict situation each side hears information it doesn't want to hear.

Exposes key issues. Future conflict is avoided by raising important issues while there is time to address them.

Stimulates critical thinking. Consistently raising (and resolving) disagreements contributes to a thinking organization.

Creates open environments. Understanding and managing conflict robs the situation of its destructive power and builds an environment where ideas are vigorously exchanged.

Stimulates creativity and innovation. Creating an open forum for diverse ideas and perspectives creates space for new ideas and new ways of thinking.

On the contrary, if you mishandle a conflict, it can bring negative consequences. Poor interpersonal skills, such as an inability to manage conflict, aren't the only reason managers derail, but they were the reason cited most often in CCL's research. A mishandled or ignored conflict can have dramatic effects on personal and organizational performance that:

Decreases productivity. Disagreements and clashes rob an otherwise productive relationship of its energy.

Decreases communication. Unmanaged conflict breeds fear and resentment, which makes it more unlikely that people will voice their opinions, views, or ideas.

Increases negative feelings. Clashes create bruised feelings and torn relationships. At worst, the organization may lose valuable individuals who seek other employment.

Increases stress. Conflict takes an emotional and physical toll on the individuals involved.

Decreases cooperation. Organizational units, such as teams or workgroups, may split into factions and cliques, each lobbying its own viewpoint.

Encourages backstabbing. The work environment is poisoned with hidden agendas and back-channel maneuverings.

Managing Conflict with Your Boss

The special case of conflict between a direct report and a boss presents unique challenges. As a manager with responsibilities up and down the organizational chain, recognizing and resolving conflicts with your boss may well define to what degree you can effectively contribute to your organization. A conflict with your boss can arise from several different kinds of situations or opposing perspectives. Here are a few examples that illustrate potential roots of a conflict:

There is no role clarity or alignment. You are not sure about how your work supports your boss's work and how it meets the mission of the organization. You may think you're doing tasks that