

# **The Benefits of Constructive Conflict Engagement**

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## Executive Summary

Conflict has the potential to better us. When we engage thoughtfully in conflict, we can grow as individuals, enjoying greater feelings of competence and enhancing our reasoning skills. Relationally, we can experience deeper connection with others and can even enjoy greater job satisfaction as a result of engaging wisely with others in conflict.

***“Wishing for a ‘conflict-free’ work environment is unrealistic and pretending to have such an environment is undesirable.”***

-Dean Tjosvold

Teams that engage collaboratively in conflict can build a culture of psychological safety, which one study found to be the number one feature of successful and high performing teams. Conflict can lead to greater creativity as team members’ dissenting views are shared and wrestled with. Not surprisingly, diverse views can also lead to better solutions to problems and increased innovation. Better decision quality is another positive outcome of conflict as team members share information and insights and moderate extreme opinions. When these benefits of conflict occur, teams become more cohesive and team members are more likely to want to remain part of the group.

As a result of the numerous individual, relational, and group-level benefits organizations with constructive conflict engagement often experience higher performance levels overall. Relationships with customers can also be strengthened when conflicts are navigated constructively.

Given these benefits to wisely engaged conflict, it is encouraging to note that conflict training has led to significant outcomes for participants in several studies. These outcomes include better communication skills, an improved ability to build relationships with others, and feeling more comfortable and assured in handling disagreements.

Almost all of the research cited in this report focuses on task conflicts – the benefits of leaning into disagreements about what needs to be accomplished and goals for the work. On the other hand, research has shown that relationship conflicts, which are characterized by differences in individuals’ norms and values, all too frequently lead to lower group morale and poorer decision making. However, it’s important to note that although relationship and task conflict are, in theory, distinct, this line often becomes blurred when someone is in the midst of an actual conflict.

***Conflict can trigger fear—but those willing to engage with courage and wisdom can find wide-ranging benefits.***

Many people experience fear when they are asked to engage in conflict of any type. Nevertheless, the very meaningful and wide-ranging potential benefits make the decision to engage wisely in conflict worth the risk.

## Introduction

According to Dean Tjosvold, a leading scholar on conflict, “Wishing for a ‘conflict-free’ work environment is unrealistic and pretending to have such an environment is undesirable.”<sup>1</sup> When we instead understand conflict as a natural part of the candid exchange of ideas, controversy can become a driver of several positive outcomes including greater creativity, deeper trust among colleagues, and better decision making.<sup>2</sup> To be sure, conflict can lead to negative outcomes when not approached wisely, but the focus of this paper is on the potential benefits conflict offers to individuals, interpersonal relationships, teams, and entire organizations.

### Three Types of Conflict Cultures

For the purposes of this paper, conflict is defined as “an active disagreement between people with opposing opinions or principles.”<sup>3</sup> Three organizational cultures related to conflict are commonly described in the literature: avoidant, confrontational and collaborative. Avoidant cultures value ignoring conflict and maintaining harmony even when that harmony is only surface level. Conflict may be suppressed or only alluded to and meetings where conflict could arise may be avoided completely. In confrontational cultures, on the other hand, organizational members are quite vocal about their opinions and fight for their beliefs. As a result, opposing sides and intense competition are common. In this cultural context, those who accommodate others’ opinions are considered weak. Finally, in collaborative conflict cultures organizational members voice

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<sup>1</sup> Tjosvold, D. (2007). The conflict-positive organization: It depends upon us. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 29(1), 19–28. <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.473>

<sup>2</sup> Uline, C. L., Tschannen-Moran, M., & Perez, L. (2003). Constructive conflict: How controversy can contribute to school improvement. *Teachers College Record: The Voice of Scholarship in Education*, 105(5), 782–816. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9620.00268>

<sup>3</sup> Conflict | definition in the Cambridge English dictionary. (n.d.-b). <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/conflict>

their concerns and pursue solutions that address each party's needs. In this context, supportive communication and confirming messages are valued.<sup>4, 5</sup>

The Colossian Forum recognizes that each of these cultures is common in organizations, but only a collaborative culture brings about numerous and long-lasting benefits to individuals and their organizations. This paper describes many of these benefits, and along the way invites the reader into a healthy, productive, and biblical approach to conflict.

### Three Types of Conflict

When conducting research on conflict, beyond describing the culture in which the conflict is taking place, scholars also commonly differentiate between three types of conflict that organizations experience:

- **Task** conflicts encompass disagreements about *what* needs to be accomplished and goals for the work. This type of conflict involves different points of view about work procedures and resource delegation.<sup>6</sup> Whether a nonprofit should build new facilities or expand their program offerings are examples of potential task conflicts.
- **Process** conflicts entail disagreements concerning *how* the task will be completed such as how responsibilities will be delegated.<sup>7</sup> The timing of a program launch or how a new initiative will be funded are examples of process conflicts.
- **Relationship** conflicts are disagreements among organizational members about interpersonal issues including differences in norms and values. For example, the appropriateness of women in church and Christian school leadership positions is an area of conflict that is rooted in differing values and interpretations of Scripture. Relationship conflict can also encompass personal incompatibilities or simply mutual dislike.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Van de Vliert, E., & Euwema, M. C. (1994). Agreeableness and activeness as components of conflict behaviors.

*Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 66(4), 674–687. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.66.4.674>

<sup>5</sup> Gelfand, M. J., Leslie, L. M., & Keller, K. (2008). On the etiology of organizational conflict cultures. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 28, 137–166. doi: 10.1016/j.riob.2008.06.001

<sup>6</sup> Jehn, K. A., & Bendersky, C. (2003). Intragroup conflict in organizations: A contingency perspective on the conflict-outcome relationship. In R. M. Kramer & B. M. Staw (Eds.), *Research in organizational behavior: An annual series of analytical essays and critical reviews*, 25, 187–242. Elsevier Science Ltd. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0191-3085\(03\)25005-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0191-3085(03)25005-X)

<sup>7</sup> Jehn, K. A. (1995). A multimethod examination of the benefits and detriments of intragroup conflict. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 40(2), 256 - 282. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2393638>

<sup>8</sup> Jehn, 1995

Relationship conflict commonly involves a “perceived threat to one’s personal or group identity, norms, and values; it exists when personal relationships within the group are characterized by personality clashes, friction, and frustration.”<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, this kind of conflict often leads to dysfunction, lower group morale, and poorer decision making. It can reduce team creativity as individuals feel angry or hurt by their coworkers.<sup>10</sup> Also, people experiencing high emotional arousal often have an impaired ability to come up with reasonable plans of action and to evaluate the possible consequences of their behavior.<sup>11</sup> Scholars generally agree, therefore, that relationship conflict is harmful to team productivity and to relations among team members.

## The Practical Context

Given these findings about the negative impact of relational conflict, most research about the benefits of conflict has focused on task or “what-related” conflict. (Process or “how-related” conflict has garnered far less attention

***Task and relationship conflict are often closely connected.***

by researchers.) However, it’s important to note that although relationship and task conflict are, in theory, distinct, this line can become blurred when someone is in the midst of an actual conflict. In fact, task conflict has been found to be positively associated with relationship conflict.<sup>12</sup> A survey of 127 individuals working in a Fortune 500 company found that not a single respondent perceived that relationship conflict occurs without task conflict also occurring. It seems that the two kinds of conflict influence one another, often making it difficult to differentiate their effects on team productivity.<sup>13</sup>

Formally, most research about the benefits of conflict has focused on task conflict but in reality it can be difficult to separate relationship and task conflict. Biblical examples of conflict highlight this blurred division of conflict types as well. Paul and Barnabus’ disagreement regarding whether they should take John Mark with them on their next journey (Acts 15:37-41) and Martha’s plea to Jesus for Mary to help her serve the people gathered in her home (Luke 10:38-42) are just two of numerous examples. The stories reflect differing goals but also differing temperaments and values, which one could argue encompass both task and relational conflict. So, while this report, for accuracy, will specify the type of conflict cited in a study (when that detail is available),

<sup>9</sup> Uline et al., 2003

<sup>10</sup> Lee, E. K., Avgar, A. C., Park, W.-W., & Choi, D. (2019). The dual effects of task conflict on team creativity. *International Journal of Conflict Management*, 30(1), 132–154. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ijcma-02-2018-0025>

<sup>11</sup> Uline et al., 2003

<sup>12</sup> Lee et al., 2019

<sup>13</sup> Solansky, S. T., Singh, B., & Huang, S. (2014). Individual perceptions of task conflict and relationship conflict. *Negotiation and Conflict Management Research*, 7(2), 83–98. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ncmr.12027>

the reader should be aware that the distinction may have less meaning in the heat of an actual conflict.

***Good can come from differences of opinion and differing values.***

There is nothing inherently wrong with conflict, as examples like Paul and Barnabus' disagreement demonstrate. But this paper takes a different perspective by considering whether there are actual *benefits* to conflict. Can something good come from differences of opinion and differing

values? Research from several disciplines provides clear evidence that the answer is yes.

The following review of research demonstrates that conflict, particularly task-related conflict, can be an important asset to individuals, interpersonal relationships, teams, and to organizations as a whole when handled wisely. These benefits include increased job satisfaction, increased interpersonal connection, and increased group creativity. This first section explores several ways that conflict can benefit individuals.<sup>14</sup>

## Benefits for Individuals

To begin this discussion, it is helpful to review research that has identified constructive and destructive behaviors individuals commonly display as they engage conflict. The table below, adapted from Davis et al., describes these two types of behavior.

### Constructive Conflict Behaviors

- Take others' perspective surrounding the conflict
- Generate potential solutions to the conflict
- Share personal emotions about the conflict
- Reach out to repair damage caused by the conflict
- Think reflectively about the conflict to determine a wise course of action
- Delay responding while emotions are high
- Adapt as they engage with the conflict

### Destructive Conflict Behaviors

- Try to win at all costs
- Demean others
- Self-criticize regarding how they handled the conflict
- Hide their true emotions
- Avoid the conflict
- Yield to the other person simply to end the conflict
- Display anger
- Retaliate

<sup>14</sup> Davis, M. H., Capobianco, S., Kraus, L. A. (2004). Measuring conflict-related behaviors: Reliability and validity evidence regarding the conflict dynamics profile. *Educational and Psychological Measurement* 64(4):707-731.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0013164404263878>

Other studies support this description of constructive and destructive behaviors related to conflict. These studies highlight that people with several individual qualities are more likely to engage conflict constructively:

1. People with cognitively flexible mindsets who are able to see disagreements from other points of view.<sup>15</sup>
2. People who have a balanced focus on themselves, and the other party involved in the conflict, rather than a focus only on one party or the other.<sup>16</sup>
3. Emotionally stable people who are able to cope with or redirect negative emotions.<sup>17</sup>

Particularly when these qualities are present, the potential benefits of conflict for individuals are significant. These benefits can include personal growth, increased job satisfaction, and increased likelihood to voice their ideas.

## Personal Growth

Studies have found that individuals who engage thoughtfully with task conflict experience personal growth, enjoying greater feelings of competence and well-being as a result.<sup>18</sup> Navigating controversy successfully can help a person feel empowered and effective as well.<sup>19</sup>

Conflict can also lead to better thinking. The influential psychologist Piaget maintained that “disequilibrium and the striving to restore a balance results in cognitive growth”<sup>20</sup> and conflict within organizations can certainly push individuals into this disequilibrium that brings about cognitive growth. As people advocate for their position and respond to questions, they may clarify their thinking and create more logical and evidence-based arguments about a host of topics that go well beyond the conflict at hand.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Gilin Oore, D., Leiter, M. P., & LeBlanc, D. E. (2015). Individual and organizational factors promoting successful responses to workplace conflict. *Canadian Psychology / Psychologie Canadienne*, 56(3), 301–310. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cap0000032>

<sup>16</sup> Gilin Oore et al, 2015

<sup>17</sup> Bradley, B. H., Anderson, H. J., Baur, J. E., & Klotz, A. C. (2015). When conflict helps: Integrating evidence for beneficial conflict in groups and teams under three perspectives. *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice*, 19(4), 243–272. <https://doi.org/10.1037/gdn0000033>

<sup>18</sup> Tjosvold, D. (1997). Conflict within interdependence: Its value for productivity and individuality. In C. K. W. De Dreu & E. Van de Vliert (Eds.), *Using conflict in organizations* (pp. 23–37). Sage Publications, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446217016.n3>

<sup>19</sup> Uline et al., 2003

<sup>20</sup> Piaget, J. (1962). *The psychology of intelligence*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

<sup>21</sup> Johnson, D. W., & Johnson, R. T. (1994). *Creative controversy: Intellectual challenge in the classroom* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Interaction Book Co.



## Increased Job Satisfaction

A survey of 743 Americans employed as bank tellers found that a collaborative conflict management culture that emphasizes cooperation and open discussion of the issues surrounding a conflict has a positive effect on job satisfaction. A dominant management culture that emphasizes active confrontation and competitive behavior, on the other hand, has a negative effect on job satisfaction.<sup>22</sup>

***A collaborative conflict culture has a positive effect on job satisfaction.***

## Increased Likelihood to Voice Ideas

When conflict helps individuals to feel more competent and to mature in their ways of thinking, they are more apt to risk voicing their ideas to colleagues. In fact, research has found that if individuals feel free to disagree and believe that they will be heard by those who hold a different view, they are more willing to contribute to the group.<sup>23</sup> A study of employees in a large Canadian organization found a positive connection between employees' involvement in task conflict and the probability that they would "speak up about opportunities for organizational betterment, even if speaking up might evoke negative responses from some organizational members."<sup>24</sup>

## Benefits for Interpersonal Relationships

Constructive conflict benefits individuals by helping them grow and become more willing to express their perspectives. These benefits in turn have a positive influence on workplace relationships, including increased consideration, flexibility, and trust among colleagues.

## Increased Consideration and Flexibility

While suppressed conflict gives the false sense that individuals understand one another, conflict that is openly dealt with allows individuals to truly understand another's position and shed inaccurate assumptions about the other party. As individuals discuss their positions, they may also begin to see the flaws in their own ideas and the value of

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<sup>22</sup> Choi, Y. The influence of conflict management culture on job satisfaction (2013). *Social Behavior and Personality: An International Journal*, 41(4), 687-692.

<http://dx.doi.org.dml.regis.edu/10.2224/sbp.2013.41.4.687>

<sup>23</sup> Uline et al., 2003

<sup>24</sup> De Clercq, D. (2021). Overworked, friendless, and constrained, but also helpful: How workplace adversity prompts employees to use task conflict to suggest organizational improvements. *Canadian Journal of Administrative Sciences / Revue Canadienne Des Sciences de l'Administration*, 38(4), 382–397. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cjas.1641>

opposing ideas, inspiring them to combine ideas to solve a problem. Through this learning process, people come to realize that no solution will be perfect, and they are therefore more willing to accept imperfect solutions that accommodate others' needs as well as their own.<sup>25</sup>

A 2008 study that analyzed 5,000 full-time European and American employees' attitudes about conflict illustrates this benefit.<sup>26</sup> Forty-one percent of those surveyed reported that conflict led to better understanding of other people, and 33% said that they had experienced improved working relationships as a result of workplace conflict.

***Well-managed conflict “breathes life and energy into our relationships... strengthens our interdependence and makes us much more innovative and productive.”***

*-Dean Tjosvold*

### Increased Trust

Scholars have found that people often grow to trust one another more as their ideas are incorporated into shared solutions, and success that is achieved together in turn strengthens relationships.<sup>27</sup> Research has also shown that cooperatively-managed conflicts, including around such sensitive issues as anger, can strengthen relationship bonds.<sup>28, 29</sup> According to Tjosvold, well-managed conflict “breathes life and energy into our relationships...strengthens our interdependence and makes us much more innovative and productive.”<sup>30</sup>

## Benefits for Teams

Given numerous individual and relational benefits of conflict that scholars have identified, it is not surprising that these benefits translate into advantages at the team level as well. This next section explores six of these advantages.

<sup>25</sup> Tjosvold, 1997

<sup>26</sup> CPP. (2008). CPP global human capital report: Workplace conflict and how business can harness it to thrive. Retrieved from <https://www.themyersbriggs.com/-/media/f39a8b7fb4fe4daface552d9f485c825.ashx>

<sup>27</sup> Uline et al., 2003

<sup>28</sup> Tjosvold, D., (2002). Managing anger for teamwork in Hong Kong: Goal interdependence and open-mindedness. *Asian Journal of Social Psychology*, 5, 107-123. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-839X.00098>

<sup>29</sup> Tjosvold, D. & Su, S. (2007). Managing anger and annoyance in organizations in China. *Group & Organization Management*, 32 (3), 260-289. <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.473>

<sup>30</sup> Tjosvold, 1997

## Increased Psychological Safety

As stated previously, a willingness to share divergent ideas with colleagues can be a positive result of constructively engaged task conflict. This willingness contributes to an environment that feels psychologically safe,<sup>31</sup> defined as an environment in which “employees feel safe to voice ideas, willingly seek feedback, collaborate, take risks, and experiment.”<sup>32</sup> Employees in this context are respectful and open to one another, promoting a culture in which individuals feel valuable, worthy, and competent. The trust that is then built allows open discussion to be less interpersonally risky and therefore more likely to occur. Also, task conflict in a psychologically safe environment is less likely to turn into relationship conflict, which, as previously discussed, is rarely beneficial on its own.<sup>33</sup>

The positive effects on a team of feeling psychologically safe are difficult to overstate. In fact, psychological safety was identified in one study as the number one feature of successful and high-performing teams.<sup>34</sup>

***Psychological safety was identified as the key quality of high-performing teams.***

A willingness to lean into conflict within a psychologically safe environment leads to several significant benefits for teams, ranging from increased creativity to better decision making.

## Increased Creativity

Conflict challenges conventional thinking and helps teams identify threats and opportunities. Debate and frank discussions can allow members to understand issues more deeply and to offer and analyze different potential solutions.<sup>35</sup> Engaging with opposing views can also give teams the confidence to take measured risks.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Chen, Z. Zhang, X., Vogel, D. (2011). Exploring the underlying processes between conflict and knowledge sharing: A work-engagement perspective. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 41(5), 1005–1033. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.2011.00745.x>

<sup>32</sup> Newman, A., Donohue, R., & Eva, N. (2017). Psychological safety: A systematic review of the literature. *Human Resource Management Review*, 27(3), 521–535. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmr.2017.01.001>

<sup>33</sup> Bradley et al., 2015

<sup>34</sup> Bergmann, B., & Schaeppi, J. (2016). A data-driven approach to group creativity. *Harvard Business Review*, July 12, 2016. <https://hbr.org/2016/07/a-data-driven-approach-to-group-creativity>

<sup>35</sup> Jehn, 1995

<sup>36</sup> Tjosvold, 2007

Research on minority dissent has found that a team is more creative when they face task conflict because the individuals interacting with the disagreeing minority are prompted to search for solutions to a problem that would not

***Research indicates that groupthink can lead to a lack of critical thinking.***

otherwise have been necessary. In this study, they also found better solutions than teams with no dissent.<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, research indicates that groupthink – the tendency to avoid potential conflict-inducing conversations about a task – can lead to a lack of critical thinking. A lack of critical thinking in turn results in a group's limited ability to find creative and effective solutions to a problem.<sup>38</sup>

Another study found that a cooperative and conflict-minimizing approach to negotiation, though yielding some short-term benefits, ultimately inclined the group towards being excessively harmonious. This reduced the independent thinking necessary for creative solutions as members became less willing to 'rock the boat.'<sup>39</sup> Instead, high-quality decisions are a result of teams that are able to hear and synthesize a set of diverse information from diverse people. While teams without differing opinions tend to reach agreement quickly, they actually make poorer decisions.<sup>40</sup>

***76% of employees reported seeing conflict lead to something positive.***

Finally, a study that surveyed 5,000 employees across Europe and America reported 30% of respondents found conflict had led to a better solution to a problem and 10% said that conflict resulted in a significant innovation or idea at

work. Finally, an impressive 76% of employees reported seeing conflict lead to something positive.<sup>41</sup>

## **Better Decision Quality**

Another line of research has found that a group's diversity of thought improves their decision quality. One hundred thirty-five groups of three people were tasked with selecting a new hire from four options. Information about each candidate was distributed among group members in such a way that the best decision was not identifiable by each person's individual information but could only be found by sharing and integrating all members' information. In groups where the members preferred to avoid dissent, they

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<sup>37</sup> Lee et al., 2019

<sup>38</sup> Jehn, 1995

<sup>39</sup> Beersma, B., & De Dreu, C. K. (2005). Conflict's consequences: Effects of social motives on postnegotiation creative and convergent group functioning and performance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 89(3), 358–374. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.89.3.358>

<sup>40</sup> CPP, 2008

<sup>41</sup> CPP, 2008

rarely made the optimal choice. But groups that were willing to disagree made the best call at much higher rates. Though the time taken to come to a decision was twice as long in these groups, disagreement generally led to better decisions than did uniformity.<sup>42</sup>

## Moderated Decisions

Conflict also keeps a group or organization from dangerous extremes. Researchers have observed that organizations tend to consist of individuals with opposite tendencies. For example, one person may be inclined to boldness and creativity while

***Conflict keeps a group from dangerous extremes.***

another is inclined to caution and tradition. If there is no conflict between these pairs of people, one of the extremes eventually becomes dominant. When this happens, the “diversity of behavioral repertoires available to the

organization... diminish[es], the organization... lose[es] its capacity for adaptation in the face of environmental change, and it... run[s] a high risk of eventual failure.”<sup>43</sup> Conflict, from this perspective, does not merely help the organization to function effectively but is actually necessary to its continuing existence. Providing intentional time and space for people who have divergent personality traits to guide group discussions is worthwhile.

## Stronger Team Cohesion and Commitment

Finally, addressing conflict in effective ways builds team cohesion. Teams that have a greater use of constructive conflict styles and lesser use of destructive conflict styles experience greater team cohesion.<sup>44</sup> Also conflict management, defined as engaging in open discussions of conflict and being prepared to manage conflict when it arises, has been found to have a positive effect on team cohesion.<sup>45</sup> Engaging constructively in task conflict also leads to greater satisfaction with group decisions as well as a desire to remain a member of the group.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Schulz-Hardt, S., Brodbeck, F. C., Mojzisch, A., Kerschreiter, R., & Frey, D. (2006). Group decision making in hidden profile situations: Dissent as a facilitator for decision quality. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 91(6), 1080–1093. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.91.6.1080>

<sup>43</sup> Pondy, L. R. (1992). Reflections on organizational conflict. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 13(3), 257–261. <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.4030130305>

<sup>44</sup> Sullivan, P. J. & Feltz, D. (2001). The relationship between intrateam conflict and cohesion within hockey teams. *Small Group Research*, 32(3), 342–355. <https://doi.org/10.1177/104649640103200304>

<sup>45</sup> Tekealb, A. G., Quigley, N. R., & Tesluk, P. E. (2009). A longitudinal study of team conflict, conflict management, cohesion, and team effectiveness. *Group & Organization Management*, 34(2), 170–205. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1059601108331218>

<sup>46</sup> Carpenter, A. (2023). Conflict: the missing ingredient for sustainability in complex partnerships. *Sustainability*, 15, 4326. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su15054326>

## Benefits for Organizations

Conflict has the potential to benefit individuals, interpersonal relationships, and teams. It can also benefit entire organizations.

### Improved Performance

Organizations that engage in task conflict ultimately perform better than those that avoid conflict. They also perform sooner than their avoidant counterparts. Harmonious conversations—conversations among colleagues that don't involve asserting divergent views or engaging with challenging questions—may *seem* to be the wisest approach. Nevertheless, studies have found that argumentation—repeatedly negotiating, discussing, and debating contentious issues—has a greater potential for reaching shared understanding, which is a key component of improved performance.<sup>47</sup>

Research on organizational cultures that support active, cooperative discussion of conflict (“collaborative conflict”) has also found evidence of improved performance.

Specifically, people working in this type of culture experience greater cohesion among employees and a greater sense of organizational potency, reflecting the level of confidence employees perceive their organization has. People working in this environment also report lower levels of burnout.<sup>48</sup>

***People working in collaborative conflict cultures report lower levels of burnout.***

### Better Relationships with Beneficiaries

At the organizational level, conflict can also strengthen relationships with customers or beneficiaries. Conflict that occurs early on in a customer relationship can serve as a unique bonding opportunity as differences are made clear and communication norms are established.<sup>49</sup>

As the relationship develops, well-managed conflict can also increase customers' trust in an organization, thereby strengthening the customer-organization relationship.<sup>50</sup> When a client experiences a problem, the way that the organization handles the

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<sup>47</sup> Carpenter, 2023

<sup>48</sup> Gelfand, M. J., Leslie, L. M., Keller, K., & de Dreu, C. (2012). Conflict cultures in organizations: How leaders shape conflict cultures and their organizational-level consequences. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 97(6). 1131–1147. DOI: 10.1037/a0029993

<sup>49</sup> Filsinger, C. & Betts, H. (2022). Making conflict work. *The International Journal of Sales Transformation*.

<https://www.journalofsalestransformation.com/making-conflict-work/>

<sup>50</sup> Tjosvold, 2007

problem can significantly impact the relationship for better or for worse. If handled poorly, the relationship will suffer and the client may look to find services elsewhere. However, well-handled conflict can increase the client's belief in the company by increasing trust that their needs have been heard and understood and future concerns can also be overcome by working through the issue together.<sup>51</sup>

## Benefits of Conflict Training

Research has consistently shown that task conflict can bring about substantial benefits within the workplace to individuals, interpersonal relationships, teams, and organizations as a whole. But an important qualifier is that task conflict, in order to be productive, must be approached wisely. Studies have identified several benefits of conflict training in the workplace. It is important to remember that the goal of conflict training does not need to be conflict *resolution* skills, but rather healthy conflict *engagement* skills. If the training goal is merely to be rid of conflict, organizations miss out on the numerous benefits conflict can bring.<sup>52</sup>

Studies show that conflict training can in fact lead to better communication skills and a more positive view of conflict. Employees can also improve their ability to build relationships with others as a result of training.<sup>53</sup>

Considering the value of conflict training in a school setting specifically, a research team conducted a dozen studies over a decade in which they provided conflict training to kindergarten through twelfth grade students.<sup>54</sup> Students who received the training learned and retained knowledge of the training and were willing to apply learned skills to real conflicts. They showed greater understanding of common feelings experienced during conflict and showed more complex reasoning about the purpose and usefulness of the strategies they had been taught. They also expressed more optimistic attitudes towards conflict. Interestingly, conflict training even led to greater academic achievement for some who received it. Students who practiced negotiation and mediation techniques and applied them to one academic subject sometimes applied them to other subjects without being prompted. They went on to score higher in those classes than peers who had not practiced these skills.

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<sup>51</sup> CPP, 2008

<sup>52</sup> Mitchell, C. (2002). Beyond resolution: What does conflict transformation actually transform? *Peace and Conflict Studies*, 9(1), Article 1. DOI: 10.46743/1082-7307/2002.1020

<sup>53</sup> Gilin Oore, et al., 2015

<sup>54</sup> Stevahn, L. (2004). Integrating conflict resolution training into the curriculum. *Theory into Practice*, 43(1), 50–58. [https://doi.org/10.1207/s15430421tip4301\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15430421tip4301_7)



***The frequency of positive outcomes from conflict increases when an organization provides conflict training to employees.***

Finally, a multinational workplace study found that the frequency of positive outcomes from workplace conflict increases when organizations provide formal conflict

training to their employees. According to the report, “Countries like the US and Brazil, who report the highest levels of conflict management training, also observe the highest amount of positive outcomes from conflict. Conversely, countries that report the lowest levels of training report the lowest amount of positive outcomes.”<sup>55</sup>

This study also found that most employees have never received conflict training, despite the fact that organizations position themselves for significant future gains by providing it. Among those who have received training, over 95% said that it was helpful to them in some way; 27% percent said it made them more comfortable and assured in handling disagreements; and 58% said it trained them to look for win-win solutions to conflict.

## Conclusion

As Christians, sometimes we come to believe that avoiding conflict and “keeping the peace” is our high calling. But there are stories of conflict woven throughout Scripture—and obvious sin isn’t always part of these stories. More importantly, dodging conflict is certainly not what Jesus modeled for us.

Not surprisingly, numerous studies support the assertion that avoiding conflict is not good for individuals or for organizations. Conflict transformation has the potential to bring about personal growth, creativity, deeper relationships, and psychologically safe environments in which to work and flourish.

Survey results from WayFinder trainees indicate that many of us fear engaging conflict. We also fear its potentially negative outcomes such as broken relationships or even more deeply divided organizations. Pre-training survey results indicate that many of us lack the confidence and skills to lean into conflict in loving, effective ways.

But the power of training is evident through published research as well as through data collected following WayFinder training. WayFinder trainees express more confidence and a new vision for conflict’s positive potential. They express hope that there is a way to engage conflict that doesn’t involve either avoiding or angrily confronting someone who holds a different view. They also share beautiful stories of the fruit of transformational conflict in their personal lives and in their organizations.

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<sup>55</sup> CPP, 2008



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