

Myths around Conflict Management

Myths

"This article shares with you some of those stereotypes (or myths as I call them) which exist around conflict management. These stereotypes have been seen by myself throughout my experience of working as a trainer in the conflict management field in Georgia."

One of those very important things that I have learned as a trainer is that, it is the group that counts. Whatever is going to be said or written, the group (or the audience) should be taken into consideration. This is what I had in my mind while writing this article. Who are the potential readers of it? My colleagues or participants of various training programmes? Or maybe even those who have never heard anything about conflict management? Whoever you are, there are very different things to share...

This article shares with you some of those stereotypes (or myths as I call them) which exist around conflict management. These stereotypes have been seen by myself throughout my experience of working as a trainer in the conflict management field in Georgia. Whatever I call myths in this article, have been expressed by participants in their questions, and exactly these questions are most often asked during the training programmes according to my experience.

There are several myths around conflict management in society. I'll try to discuss some of them briefly here, in order to either neutralise or give them some realistic basis.

Myth 1

After my participation in Conflict Management Training, conflict will never happen to me.

Over a long period of time I have come to realise that this is one of the main expectations of the majority of participants. But this does not express at all my thoughts as a trainer about conflict management training programmes. Therefore, recently I started conducting my training on conflict management with neutralisation of this myth as a main aim.

After all, this myth may sound quite fair, if it is transformed into the question: What does it

really mean for me if I participate in a conflict management training programme? Will it be possible to avoid conflicts completely in the future?

Conflict is an indivisible part of our lives. Everywhere, where there is any kind of a movement, there is a conflict. The existence of conflict itself is not a negative phenomenon. Quite often conflicts lead us to positive outcomes: we better understand the problem, better analyse our own behaviour, needs and interests, we better understand our partners and, above all, conflict may serve as a resource for establishing co-operative relations with them.

On the other hand, there are many examples when conflict is followed by polarisation, positional fighting, a waste of various resources and even violence. There is no need for me to cite examples here, I think.

Outcomes of conflict are dependent not so much on the content of a concrete conflict, but rather on the skills and knowledge of the parties involved regarding how to manage the situation. Thus, conflict itself is neither negative nor positive. What is negative, is the process of the escalation of a conflict. So, on the one hand, it is possible (and worthwhile) to increase skills in conflict management – learning how to manage conflicts, and, on the other hand, it is practically impossible to avoid all conflicts throughout one's life. After all, even if it is realistic to avoid them, why should one avoid something that could become a resource for the achievement of various positive outcomes?

Thus, the assumption that after participation in a conflict management training programme conflict will never be experienced in the future by someone, is really a myth. The reality is that it is possible to avoid the escalation of a conflict. ➤



by Sofiko Shubladze



Myth 2

One of the parties involved in a conflict is right and all others are wrong.

This myth is often presented in questions asked by participants in conflict management training programmes in the following way: How can we identify who is wrong and who is right in a conflict situation?

And, really, how can one identify it? What could be the barometer, which measures this correctly? If you have ever listened to two different parties involved in conflict, you may have noticed how different from each other the two views are you have heard. Sometimes, it sounds as if we have been told two different stories. And quite often neither of them is "wrong", i.e., both parties are telling the truth. But, we should be aware of the fact that this is the truth seen by their eyes and heard by their ears.

Yes, reality is subjective. The logic of the emotional world is not as strict as the laws of physics. For instance, we all know that if we throw an object up, it will fall down. (This is obviously not the truth in a context of the whole universe - it will not happen in the place where gravity is not present). The laws of the emotional world are not so solid. What makes one happy, could have a very negative influence on another's mood...What is important for one person, is not essential for another...

Subjective realities - we could also call them alternative realities - are developed on the basis of personal experience. Also, they are influenced very much by those social groups, which the person represents. This group could be a family, neighbourhood, professional unit, ethnicity, nationality, etc.

In order to better understand how subjective realities influence peoples' perception of various events, let me give you an example. Let's for a moment try to discuss who or what is "a drug addict". There are several parties who may consider this issue from different points of view. For instance, for doctors drug addicts are patients, for police they are criminals, for representatives of the orthodox church they are general sinners, for those who are involved in the drug business, they are clients, and so on and so on. Now, imagine a conflict situation when a doctor and a policeman argue whether drug addicts are patients who need special treatment or rather criminals who should be put in prison. And in this situation you try to answer the question: who is right or wrong in this conflict? Probably you would agree that in this case this approach is not so effective, and it is worthwhile to say that both parties involved are right based on their subjective reality. When we ask others to see, interpret, or evaluate events the way we do, this indirectly means that we ask them to deny their own subjective reality, and thus, to ignore their own past experience. How rational is this approach?

On the other hand, of course, there are some situations when one of the parties involved in a conflict just does not tell the truth - this party lies. Thus, the question about whether it is possible or not to identify who's right and who's wrong is partially fair. However, approaching conflict situations with the question "Who's right?" is not so rational and requires reconsideration.

Myth 3

In addition to these two myths or stereotypes about conflict management, there is one more stereotype, which could be expressed as follows:

The party involved in conflict chooses collaboration as a strategy for conflict management, only because he/she is generally "nice" (or "kind", or "altruistic").

This stereotype, for me, can be linked to another question for discussion. What is collaboration? Is it a skill, which may bring benefit in some cases? Or, maybe it is rather a general attitude, and its selection as a strategy for conflict management is related to the basic personal characteristics of a party?

Further discussion of this issue would take us into the depths of social sciences, which I would like to avoid in this article. I would just add that I try to include into conflict management training programmes relevant examples, exercises or cases, which help participants to realise that one should attempt to co-operate. This is not because co-operation is more altruistic, but because in most cases collaboration is more beneficial than any other type of conflict management strategy.

My experience tells me that, when this idea is understood by participants, then the concept of collaboration and joint problem-solving becomes more acceptable and realistic.

So, I have tried to share with you some of the strong stereotypes, which exist among participants when I conduct conflict management training programmes in Georgia. All of these stereotypes under discussion are expressed in many ways, usually in frequently asked questions.

A couple of questions for you now: Are they really myths around conflict management, as I called them here? Or is this my subjective reality, based on my personal experience?

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