

## **Fighting, Stifling, Solving** **3 techniques to manage social conflicts**

in the Environment...,  
in Health ...  
in Education ...  
in the Company ...  
in the group of friends ...  
in the Family...

### **What is a conflict?**

Conflict is a healthy display of group intelligence and, if properly exercised, can be the driving force behind the creative resolution of social problems.

Hence, conflict is no more than intelligence exercising, questioning information, checking for solutions. Managing conflict effectively is, therefore, using the energy and creativity of groups arising from the use of collective intelligence in a given problem.

But conflict is not an easy situation. In its most common and traditional form, it wears out groups, it creates a bad relational climate and it does not solve problems. It enjoys a terrible reputation and is often confused with "social disorder". And all this because conflict is poorly understood and poorly managed. Here's how.

In a simple definition, it can be said that conflict is the result of the confrontation between individuals or groups in a problem.



This means that a conflict arises, not because of a problem, but because the views of individuals concerning that problem, harden and crystallise against each other - becoming adverse.

Let us look at the three elements present in a conflict, individuals, problem, and crystallisation, and their main characteristics.

The main characteristic of the element individuals is the difference in points of view. In fact, each individual, as a result of genetics and experience, holds a unique way of looking at problems, which makes him/her distinct from all others.



Is this a handicap to the social system? No, on the contrary, it is these individual differences that make up the richness of the social system and ensure its evolution. It is "different thought" that pushes innovation, and the questioning of preconceived truths that promote changes in History.

Thus, it is not because of the element individuals that conflict can be considered negative.

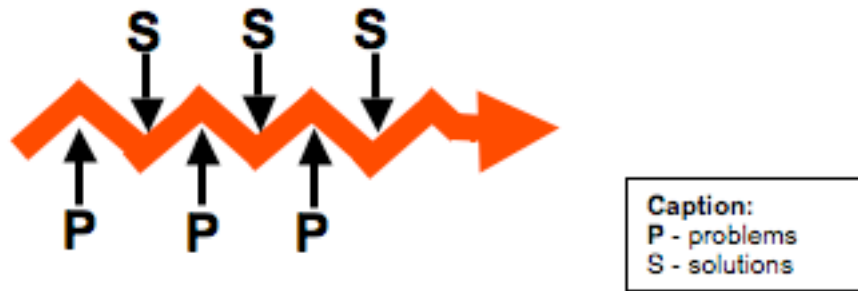
The main characteristics of the element problem are its complexity and duration. In other words, problems are, by definition, tangled and complicated situations, and they are always there. They form an integral part of social system dynamics.



In fact, it is utopic (optimistic or pessimistic) to consider that the social system evolves in a continuous line with no obstacles. Optimistic utopia sees human evolution moving towards a wonderful destination, while pessimistic utopia sees human evolution moving towards the abyss.

Both are myths, because history shows that human evolution is a complex alternating and contradictory movement between problems and solutions. This means that, in every historical moment, the social system draws a solution to a given problem, a solution that will solve this problem but create a new one.

Problem versus solution, solution versus problem, this is how human history evolves. And it is this complex and contradictory motion that also guarantees social change.

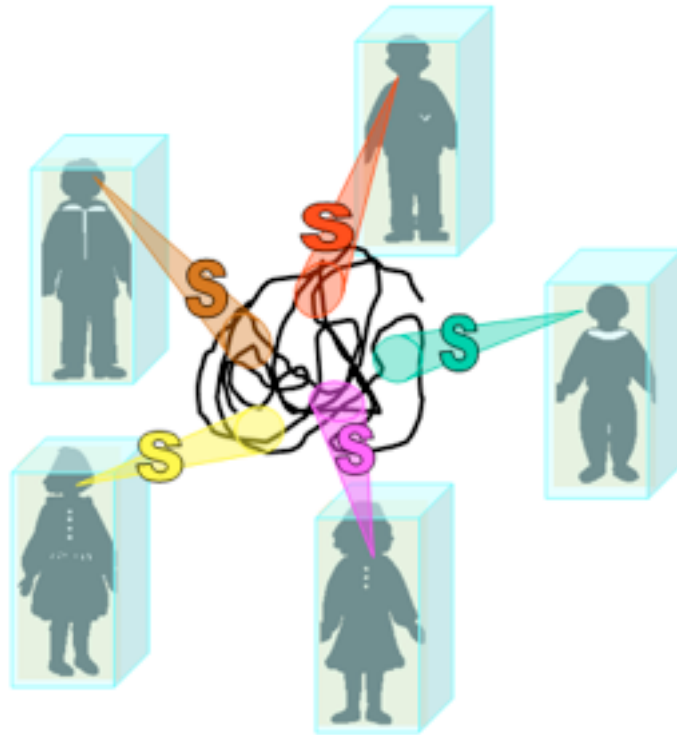


So, it is also not because of the element problem that conflict can be considered negative.

Finally, the main characteristic of the element crystallisation is the rigidity, immovability and isolation it induces on the points of view of individuals. When there is crystallisation, the point of view of the individual closes down to any external elements, rejects all information that is different, refuses to reassess the situation, and is also incapable of looking at the problem from the perspective of others.



Accordingly, individuals with crystallised positions never discuss the problem in all its various dimensions, never reflect on the various points of view in question, and never seek a comprehensive solution that serves everyone. Instead, each person thinks about the problem only from his/her own point of view, looking for partial solutions that will serve him/her, and defending them by imposing upon the partial solutions of others.



And so it seems that crystallisation is the negative aspect of conflict.

If this is the case, social conflicts are seen as negative because the groups involved in the discussion of the problems start this discussion with preconceived ideas about which should be the "ideal" solution to be adopted. This "ideal" only arises because each group thought the problems from its own particular perspective and, consequently, presents itself to the discussion armed with these solutions, like prefabricated home remedies that, hardened and crystallised, are used as protective shields against the solutions advocated by the others.

Hence, there will be groups who will defend the nationalisation of businesses and others their privatisation, or the rise in wages against the freezing of any salary increases, employment versus robotic, private investment versus state subsidy, protectionism versus market liberalisation... etc. When analysing these "solutions", it is clear that each one of them resulted from a partial perspective of the problems.

It is as if each believed that the great complexity of these situations could be reduced to mere advocacy of positions resulting from their partial perspectives.

Partial solutions against partial solutions, this is the key that opens the door to the bad reputation of conflict.

### 3 techniques to manage the phenomenon

Now, faced with a conflict, there are basically three techniques for its management:

- Fighting,
- Stifling,
- Solving.

About the first two, you might say that they are practised daily. We just have to look around us to find conflicts managed using the fighting and/or stifling techniques. However, these two techniques can never take positive advantage from the conflict. On the contrary, it exacerbates or postpones it.

The third is not so common and usually only appears, especially in times of great disaster (earthquakes, floods...), when projects arise that strongly mobilise the action of social groups and also in times of great technological change. This technique benefits from the positive aspects of the conflict, sets "collective intelligence" in motion and can solve the problems.

Let us see how each one is characterised.

#### Fighting

Fighting is basically a "lose-lose" game. However, as there is always a player who loses more than the other, it is usually called a "win-lose" game.

In this technique the adversary system seeks confrontation, in other words, all those involved want to measure forces with one other, wiping out their mutual differences. The adversary system thus becomes a winner / loser system. For this, all parties attack one another, leading to mutual injuries, ranging from slander to war, to strikes or dismissal.

The game ends when one of the actors manages to undermine the other in such a way that the latter is forced to go to the negotiating table in a position of inferiority.

In negotiation, the weaker the position of the party involved, the more compromises it will have to make, but everyone will try to reach a final solution for themselves, the most favourable possible, not from the perspective of the problem that caused it, but in view of the future disputes they wish to continue bringing about.

The "problem", that complex situation that needed to be solved, was always far from everyone's concerns. The so-called "discussion of the problem" was reduced to the fight between the various partial solutions. As a consequence, what comes out of the negotiation is the solution defended by the stronger party in this fight, thus proving its strength. In addition, this result will allow the loser to maintain its fighting position until the next conflict.

Naturally, this negotiated solution cannot, under any circumstances, make the problem disappear, in other words, solve it, because what is important for all players is that the solution adopted maintains the adversary system in force and strong enough to continue confrontation, in this or in another problem situation.

This technique has, therefore, the (dis) advantage of keeping the adversary system permanently active and the "problems" unsolved.

One of the most common symptoms of the Fighting environment in organisations is the communication challenge - for example, the high level of negative reaction generated by any internal memo, whether on the part of the Board of Directors, when it receives a note from the workers committee, or on the part of this committee, when it receives a decision from the Board, or even on the part of the workers, when they receive information from any one of the two.



## **Stifling**

A second conflict management technique is Stifling. This is basically a game of "neither one nor the other".

Here, one (or several) of the players in the adversary system do not wish, for any reason, to see the "problem" raised, or even the various partial solutions into play, to be made clear. Thus, any strategy will be towards the silencing of voices, leading to an undifferentiated amalgam (sum) of their differences. This result can be obtained through more or less elaborate techniques of manipulation of group communication, such as:

- discussing postponement tactics, such as: "creating an interdepartmental committee that will study the possibility of doing a preliminary draft that will study the feasibility of presenting a draft ...";
- creating or using more "urgent" events to divert the attention of groups;

- evoking the high complexity and technicality of the problem, thus leading to its eternal discussion;
- diminishing and/or discrediting of the interlocutors, which will lead to the endless consultation of successive "experts", which are, in turn, also discredited;
- etc.

The game ends when the groups, manipulated, lose the desire to clearly discuss their positions, and are then drawn into a compromise. This is characterised by the "approval" of a solution that does not solve the problem or cover any of the private solutions of the groups involved. It merely postpones the discussion of the solutions to a more or less undetermined time in the future.

As with the previous technique, the same happens with Stifling where the resolution of the "problem" is not part of the concerns of groups involved. The aim is rather prior to that, since not even mention of the problem is desired. Consequently, either the discussion is not carried out or it will focus on absolutely marginal issues. Instead of the fighting between private solutions, we are faced with a gagging situation.

This technique has the (dis) advantage of creating a situation of permanent tension between groups, or a pressure cooker, which, when it bursts, could provide very interesting Fighting opportunities.

As an example, in organisations where conflict is stifled, one of the most common symptoms is the deep silence of the formal work meetings when compared with the intensity of informal hallway conversations. Work organisations living in stifled conflict usually have high levels of rumour<sup>1</sup> and a high rate of group neurosis.



<sup>1</sup> - see development of this theme in the article "The rumour in the company - the dynamics of the counter power" - Paula Silveira

## Solving

We must now address the Solving technique. This is basically a game of Win-Win. Here the aim is neither the measuring of forces nor the silencing of the voices. It is about solving the problem.

For this, the discussion of the various actors focuses not on their personal solutions, but on the search for a solution, which, by solving the problem will make it disappear. For this to happen, that is, to find a solution that solves the problem, it is essential that all positions are addressed, all points of view in the game. It is, therefore, about integrating differences.

But finding such a solution requires that each party does not waive their personal diagnosis of the problem, which results from their particular experience. In fact, the different point of view is what the whole wealth of this technique is about. It also implies the relinquishing of private solutions, which were no more than partial solutions, since they were determined based on partial views only.

The fighting and gagging of the previous techniques is discarded, to embrace the debate of the different dimensions of the problem and the creative construction of its solution, by maintaining the different point of view and by relinquishing the personal solution it originated.

The whole strategy is thus developed towards the dismantling of the adversarial system and its transformation into an "enterprising system". The tactics used result from methods of group locomotion, questioning techniques and from the dynamics of creativity groups, which are nowadays widely disseminated.

It is collective intelligence, properly streamlined and fully functioning<sup>2</sup>.

The game ends with the Re-enactment. This consists, basically, of validating the solution found, whose quality is measured by the ease of implementation and by the degree of gain (or advantage) that was conferred to all the groups involved.

This conflict management technique has the (dis) advantage of using the entrepreneurial potential of individuals and groups, and makes the two previous techniques obsolete.

In an organisation where conflict was managed by Solving, one of the symptoms is, for example, the commitment of all the groups involved (former competitors) to implementing the solution and its great capacity to overcome the operational difficulties of implementation.

The communication of groups involved in the dynamics of Solving overrides all behaviour typical of Fighting (annulment of differences) with the typical behaviour of creativity groups. The table below shows these two types of behaviour:

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<sup>2</sup> - See the reference to the methods for management of collective intelligence in the article "Environmental education. How to do?" - Paula Silveira.



## Neutralising differences



- Judging
- Interrupting
- Attacking
- Accusing
- Talking excessively
- Domineering by shouting
- Sarcasm
- Threats

## Integrating differences



- Listening
- Asking for clarification
- Giving information
- Asking in a positive way
- Not judging
- Summarising

In short, and as you can see in the following figure, the groups have changed their relative position and the focus of their attention. They no longer confront one another through the "problem". They confront the "problem" from the same side of the barricade.



## New solutions to old problems

In short, social problems are often extremely complex situations, which can (and should) be viewed from many different points of view and that are only solved when all parties find that the problem really ceased to exist.

One would say, therefore, that it is necessary to implement another logic and methodology in the management of social conflict, recognised as intelligent collective energy, directed towards creative problem solving.

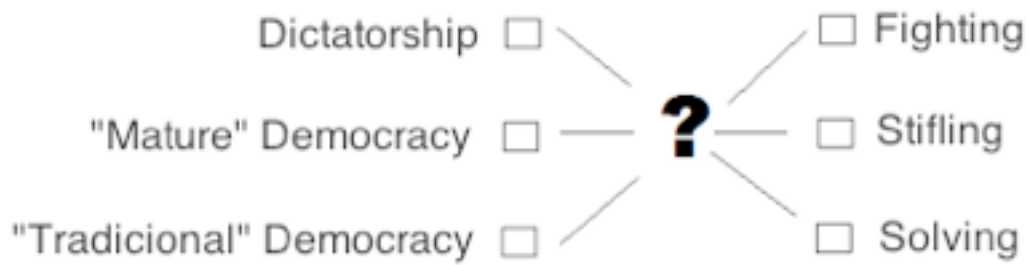
Therefore, the objective is to seek new solutions to old problems, by setting up a collective system of creative search for alternatives as yet unknown, using the positive energy of social groups.

As the saying goes, light comes from discussion. But this is not the practice...



**Guess ...**

What is the political regime characteristic of each of the addressed techniques?



See solution on the next page

**Solution**

Fighting is the technique characteristic of traditional democracy. This is established from fighting between groups representing different points of view on the issues, and measuring forces with one other to win the right to impose their partial solutions. The rule of majority measures the degree of acceptance of these solutions. Communication between the combatants is always bitter, accusatory and defiant, trying to stage the dynamics of victory / defeat.

Stifling is the technique characteristic of dictatorship. This is established from gagging groups, imposing the silence of their differences. "Bread and circus" is the motto of the dictator - eat, distract yourself, and do not waste time thinking...

Solving is the technique characteristic of the mature democracy. This is established from the discussion of group differences and oriented towards creative problem solving.

