Conflict Diagnosis: How to deal with a conflict?

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Summary: 1. Introduction. – 2. Exploring the exterior cause of the conflict (circumstances of the case). – 3. Defining the type of conflict. – 4. Classifying the stage of conflict. – 5. Finding an appropriate dispute resolution tool. – 6. Conclusions.

1. INTRODUCTION

Conflicts are inevitable, they can arise whenever and wherever people meet (may it be at the workplace, at the place of study/vocational training, within families, with friends, etc.). Despite being often considered to have negative – sometimes even destructive – effects, conflicts bear potential for growth and development, if those, who are involved, want to change old attitudes.[1] Without conflicts, society would not evolve. If they are treated in a constructive way, however, progress is initiated. Therefore, it is necessary to work on conflicts with a systematic approach. In this regard, scientists are examining the different facets of conflicts and developing models and tools for conflict analysis and diagnosis.

The ability to deal with conflicts includes the competence to approach conflicts self-confidently, analytically and in a solution-oriented manner in order to successfully resolve them.[2] Productive tensions and challenges lead to an increase in competence in the form of an increased ability to resolve conflicts.[3] Diagnosing conflicts is an essential part of this ability and can roughly be divided into the following elements:

- exploring the exterior cause of the conflict (circumstances of the case);
- defining the type of conflict;
- classifying the level of escalation;
- finding an appropriate dispute resolution tool. [4]

These elements are of importance, since in order to react adequately and/or give good advice it is necessary to understand the dynamics behind the problem, to find out who is involved, what are their interests and goals as well as how the conflict has progressed.[5] Otherwise the dispute may not be solved at all, personal or business relationships may be damaged and/or the parties to the conflict may find themselves unsatisfied with the outcome, because an inappropriate dispute resolution strategy was chosen.[6]

This article provides different approaches to the above-mentioned aspects. It shall introduce students as well as teachers to some basic techniques, models and tools that can

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[1] Solarte-Vásquez, M. C. The Wider Context: An Introduction to Conflict Management and Dispute Resolution. *Mediation in Civil and Criminal Cases to Foster European Wide Settlement of Disputes* (E-Book). Retrieved 01.03.2021. from https://mediation.turiba.lv/index.php?id=42.

[2] Böttcher, W. & Lindart M. (2009). *Schlüsselqualifiziert*. Weinheim: Beltz Verlag, p. 112.

[3] Heyse, V. & Erpenbeck J. (2004). *Kompetenztraining: 64 Informations- und Trainingsprogramme*. Stuttgart: Schäffer-Poeschel Verlag für Wirtschaft, p. 329.

[4] Based on Hagen, J.J. & Lenz C. (2008). *Wirtschaftsmediation*. Wien: Manz Verlag, p. 33.

[5] Proksch, S. (2016). *Conflict Management*. Cham: Springer, pp. 3-8.

[6] Glasl, F. (2017). Konfliktdiagnose. *Mediation und Konfliktmanagement (2nd ed.)*. Trenczek T., Berning D., Lenz C. & Will H.-D. (edt.). Baden-Baden: Nomos, p. 157; Proksch, S. (2016). *Conflict Management*. Cham: Springer, p. 3 f.

be applied either to one's own conflicts or to the conflicts of others from the position of a third neutral party.

2. EXPLORING THE EXTERIOR CAUSE OF THE CONFLICT (CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE case)

The first step when dealing with a conflict is to identify its exterior cause, which, according to Hagen,[7] corresponds to the cause of action in a lawsuit (e.g. breach of contract). In this regard one must clarify which persons are involved and what roles they have. Further in the process, the different positions and interests of these persons are explored to path the way for a potential consensus. In order to gather all necessary information and to fully comprehend the situation, it is important to master some basic communication techniques, which are presented in the following.

2.1. Asking questions

Asking questions is one of the two core competences in conflict diagnosis and management. Although it may sound simple, asking the right question(s) at the right time can pose its challenges. Kessen[8] identifies three attributes useful questions have in common: 1.They are understandable, which means the person asking has to adopt her/his language to the person asked. 2. They are open (as opposed to closed, which means that closed questions can only be answered with "yes" or "no"). 3. They arouse interest, i.e. they address cognitive and affective needs. Open questions are suitable for gathering information, getting a different picture and supporting the conflict parties in opening up. Especially helpful are the so-called "W-questions" (**W**hat? Ho**w**? **W**ho? **W**here? **W**hen? **W**hich? etc.). However, closed questions might also be useful to come to decisions or for clarification (e.g. "Do you accept this proposal?", "Have you already spoken about the problem?").

Apart from the distinction between open and closed questions there exist a variety of other question types like circular questions ("How would your friend describe the situation?"), paradox questions ("What could be done to make the situation worse?") or concretizing questions ("How exactly did your meeting go?")[9] that are beyond the scope of this article. The most important recommendation to keep in mind, however, is to maintain an open, curious, respectful and appreciative attitude.[10]

2.2. Active Listening

The second core competence – active listening – can be described as 'classical' method.[11] It means listening on an emotional level from an empathetic position. The person listening devotes their full attention to the person talking, signaling the reception of their message on a non-verbal and verbal level (nodding their head, saying "yes", "okay" etc.).

[7] Hagen, J.J. & Lenz, C. (2008), *Wirtschaftsmediation*. Wien: Manz Verlag. p. 33.

[8] Kessen, S. (2017), Die Kunst des Fragens. *Mediation und Konfliktmanagement (2nd ed.).* Trenczek T., Berning D., Lenz C. & Will H.-D. (edt.). Baden-Baden: Nomos, pp. 324-325.

[9] Geier, F. (2017), Kommunikation in der Mediation. *Mediation und Konfliktmanagement (2nd ed.).* Trenczek T., Berning D., Lenz C. & Will H.-D. (edt.). Baden-Baden: Nomos, p. 321.

[10] Kessen, S. (2017), Die Kunst des Fragens, *Mediation und Konfliktmanagement (2nd ed.).* Trenczek T., Berning D., Lenz C. & Will H.-D. (edt.). Baden-Baden: Nomos, p. 324 f.

[11] Thomann, C. & Schulz von Thun, F. (2017), *Klärungshilfe 1, Handbuch für Therapeuten, Gesprächshelfer und Moderatoren in schwierigen Gesprächen*. Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, pp. 92 f.

Often the mistake is made to immediately give advice or to talk about similar experiences made by oneself, but the intention should be to completely understand the other person's story, the facts and circumstances as well as the underlying needs and feelings.[12]

Part of active listening is to ask questions and to paraphrase what was said. The latter means to summarize/repeat the story in one's own words neutrally and without any judgment. It helps to reassure oneself that what was heard was also understood correctly.[13] Moreover, one should try to include the "sub-text" (the actual meaning, the feelings and interests) in the paraphrase. This way the person speaking feels understood, is supported in reflecting her/his own situation and feelings and is invited to open up even more. These communication techniques are not only useful in the first stage of conflict diagnosis, but during all steps. Furthermore, showing empathy helps to build rapport and to prevent conflicts from escalating.[14]

3. DEFINING THE TYPE OF CONFLICT

A distinction of the type of conflicts must be made regarding the conflict parties (internal and interpersonal conflicts), the different forms of the conflict's appearance (hot vs cold conflicts and latent vs manifest conflicts) as well as the matter of dispute (conflicts of interest, value and relationship conflicts). To provide an example: Two co-workers are having a dispute that seems like a personal conflict between them, while the real cause of the problem lies within the structure of the organization. It could be the case that the roles of the employees are organized in a way that they inevitably constrain each other when fulfilling their tasks.[15] Trying to find a consensus on a personal level without considering the structural problem will not be successful in this situation. By defining the type of conflict, the root cause can be found and treated, which will give the parties the best chance to find sustainable solutions.

3.1. Difference according to the conflict parties

Internal conflicts (intrapersonal)

Internal conflicts are the conflicts we fight with ourselves. Tensions arise within a person resulting from contradicting needs.[16] Mostly we have to make different decisions in our daily life, and reflect if it was really the right decision. On the other side you have to live with the feeling that the decision could possibly turn out to be wrong. The following variants can be distinguished:

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[12] Proksch, S. (2016), *Conflict Management.* Cham: Springer, pp. 61-62.

[13] Deutsch, M. (2014), Cooperation, Competition, and Conflict. *The Handbook of Conflict Resolution (3rd ed.).* Coleman, P., Deutsch, M. & Marcus, E. (edt.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, p. 15.

[14] Kraus, R. & Morsella, E. (2014), Communication and Conflict. *The Handbook of Conflict Resolution (3rd ed.).* Coleman, P., Deutsch, M. & Marcus, E. (edt.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, pp. 174-178.

[15] Proksch, S. (2016), *Conflict Management.* Cham: Springer, p. 6.

[16] Röhl, K. R. (1987), *Rechtssoziologie. Ein Lehrbuch.* Köln: Carl Heymanns Verlag, p. 483.

Internal conflicts

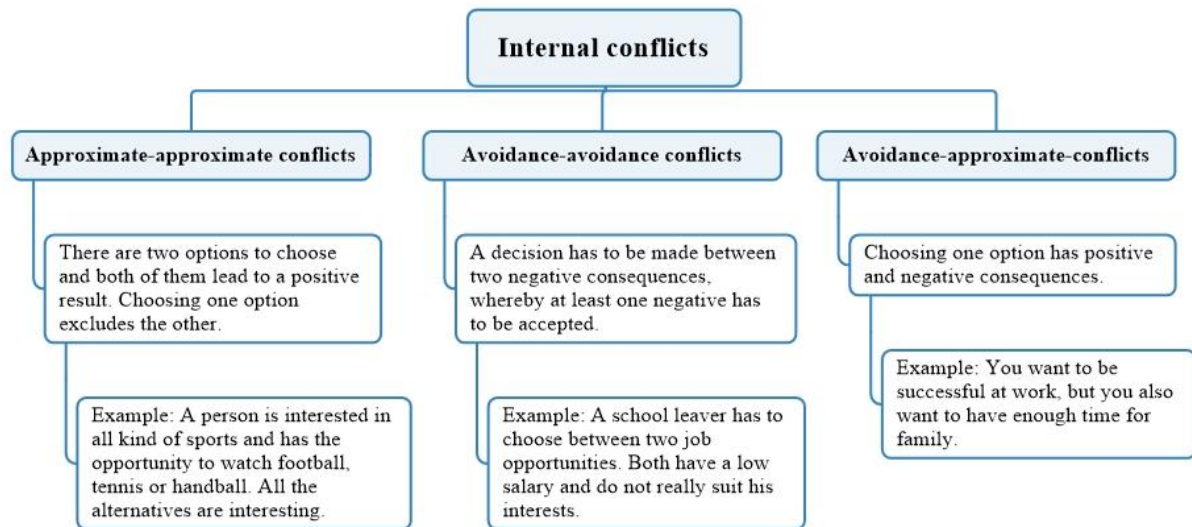| Approximate-approximate conflicts	Avoidance-avoidance conflicts	Avoidance-approximate-conflicts
There are two options to choose and both of them lead to a positive result. Choosing one option excludes the other.	A decision has to be made between two negative consequences, whereby at least one negative has to be accepted.	Choosing one option has positive and negative consequences.
Example: A person is interested in all kind of sports and has the opportunity to watch football, tennis or handball. All the alternatives are interesting.	Example: A school leaver has to choose between two job opportunities. Both have a low salary and do not really suit his interests.	Example: You want to be successful at work, but you also want to have enough time for family.

Figure 1: Internal conflicts[17]

An unresolved internal conflict is characterized by the fact that you want or need two things at the same time, but they contradict each other. This internal conflict is particularly relevant in psychology.

Social conflicts (interpersonal)

All interpersonal conflicts, in which two people or small groups are involved, are called social conflicts. Feelings, needs, our role behavior and basic attitude towards other people are relevant for our behavior. A distinction can be made between **conflicts of needs** and **conflicts of value**. When there is a conflict of needs, one feels directly disturbed by the behavior of another or hindered in fulfilling their own needs.

For example, you want to go home quickly after work, but you have to finish an urgent job for your boss. Conversely, conflicts of value have no direct impact on you personally, but you would like another person to change his/her behavior. For example, parents do not want their children to be pierced or tattooed.

According to Glasl, a social conflict is an interaction (a related communication or action) between actors (individuals, groups, organizations etc.), whereby at least one actor has incompatibilities in his/her thinking / imagining / perceiving and / or feeling with the other actor (other actors), experienced in such a way that an impairment by another actor or other actors occurs in trying a realization.[18]

The following types of conflict also belong to the interpersonal level. **Conflicts of goals** occur when two people pursue two goals that are difficult or incompatible. In a team there could be a disagreement about the goals and the expected outcome. For example, the boss expects his assistant to complete all tasks quickly and spontaneously. For the assistant, this means that other work remains unfinished, which in turn often leads to unpaid overtime. The secretary feels overwhelmed and sometimes not respected. Often a lack of agreements and coordination are the cause of a conflict of goals. A **distributional conflict** arises as a

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[17] Glasl, F. & Weeks, D. (2008), *Die Kernkompetenzen für Mediation und Konfliktmanagement*. Stuttgart: Concadora-Verlag, pp. 96 f.

[18] Glasl, F. (2020), *Konfliktmanagement: ein Handbuch für Führung, Beratung und Mediation (12th ed.)*. Bern – Haupt – Stuttgart: Verlag Freies Geistleben, pp. 17 f.

result of a dispute over a scarce good. If someone does not get what he/she thinks he/she is entitled to (e.g. salary, further education), we speak about a distribution conflict. A lack of resources can be the cause of a distributional conflict. In a **solution conflict** there are different ideas about how to solve a task in a group. In a **relationship conflict** the parties experience disruptive interpersonal tensions while working or living together. Relationship conflicts occur when the "chemistry" is not right anymore. These two factors can exacerbate a conflict.[19] The last type of conflict also belongs to the category "difference according to the subject of dispute" which will be described in the next chapter.

3.2. Difference according to the subject of dispute

For Glasl, the subject of the dispute is one of the main aspects of the conflict division. Possible subjects of the dispute are different relationships, interests, needs, values, beliefs, etc.
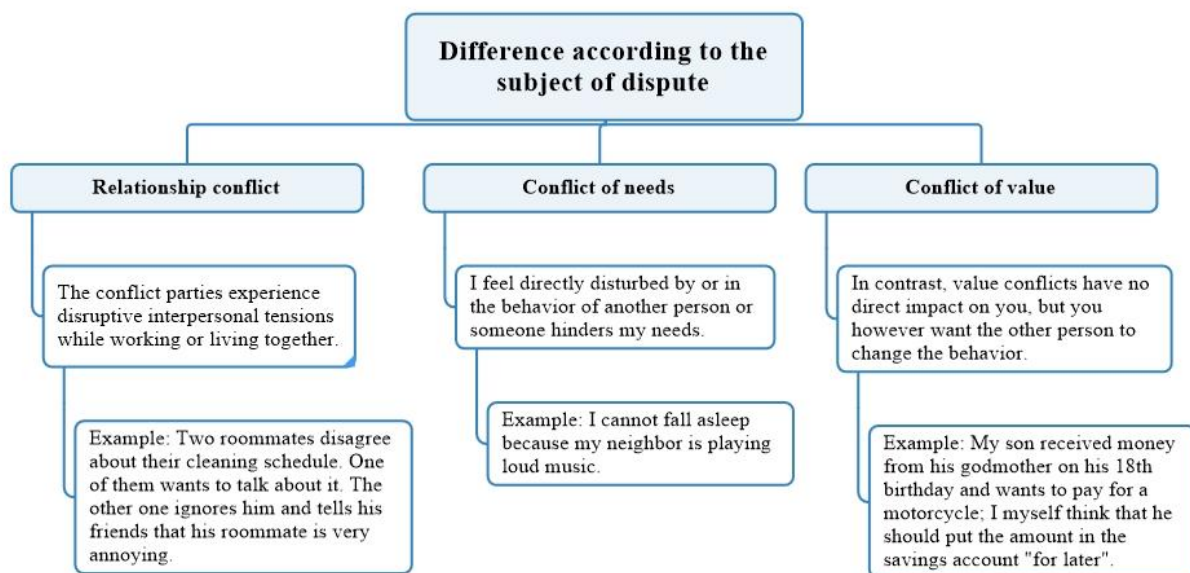

Figure 2: Difference according to the subject of dispute[20]

3.3. Difference according to the appearance

This differentiation/distinction of conflicts focuses on the interaction of the conflict parties. In **hot conflicts** the atmosphere is characterized by over-sensitivity and over-activity. The conflicts are fought out loud and there is often a focus on one opinion leader. The own motives are not up for discussion and attempts are made to convince the opponent. In **cold conflicts** the climate is determined by disappointment and frustration. Communication comes to a complete standstill and the mutual attacks are also designed calculative. Self-esteem drops and the parties avoid each other more and more. These conflicts are difficult to recognize and in order to be able to deal with them at all, you usually

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[19] Rüttinger B. & Sauer J. (2016), *Konflikt und Konfliktlösen*. Wiesbaden: Springer Gabler, p. 90.
[20] Glasl, F. (2020), *Konfliktmanagement: ein Handbuch für Führung, Beratung und Mediation (12th ed.)*. Bern – Haupt – Stuttgart: Verlag Freies Geistleben, pp. 55 ff.

have to "warm them up".[21] A **latent conflict** means that the conflict already exists and can also be perceived, but has not yet been openly discussed. A **manifest conflict** is an open conflict, which is expressed in the conflict behavior.[22]

4. CLASSIFYING THE STAGE OF CONFLICT

After reflecting with what type of conflict you are dealing with, the model of Glasl[23] can be used so that the conflict parties know which of the nine levels of escalation the conflict at hand has reached. It is therefore a very useful diagnostic tool for the conflict facilitator and sensitizes people to the mechanisms of conflict escalation. Such sensitizing may lead to a greater awareness of the steps one should take care to avoid if one wants to prevent a conflict from escalating out of control.

The first stage of conflict escalation develops when there is a disagreement about some issue or frustration in a relationship. It is called **tension**. The problem remains and leads to irritation. Interests and opinions crystallize into standpoints, i.e. fixed positions about a certain issue. In the perception of the conflict parties, these standpoints tend to become mutually incompatible. The positions attract adherents, which means groups start to form around certain standpoints, and for or against a certain standpoint. Interactions with the other side are disappointing, and are perceived as a waste of time and energy. The communication between the parties is still based on mutuality. **In stage 2, the debate**, the discussions lead to verbal confrontations. The parties look for more forceful ways of pushing through their standpoints and want to appear successful, strong and skillful rather than compliant, insecure and incompetent. Debates are no longer only focused on which standpoint has more merits, but also on who is most successful in promoting the standpoints. The behavior introduces mistrust in the relationship. Discussions turn into debates, where inflexible standpoints collide with each other. The growing mistrust creates a sense of insecurity and loss of control. **At stage 3, actions not words**, the parties no longer believe that further talks will resolve anything, and they shift their attention to actions. The most important goal at this stage is to block the counterpart from reaching their goal, and to push through one's own interests. Actions and non-verbal communication dominate the course of events, which tends to speed up the escalation process. Fantasies about possible motives and hidden strategies can develop unchecked. The feeling of being blocked is further increased by the limited possibility of genuine verbal communication.

[21] Höher, P. & Höher, F. (2004), *Konfliktmanagement - Konflikte kompetent erkennen und lösen.* Bergisch Gladbach: EHP-Verlag, p. 50; Glasl, F. (2020), *Konfliktmanagement: ein Handbuch für Führung, Beratung und Mediation (12th ed.).* Bern – Haupt – Stuttgart: Verlag Freies Geistleben, pp. 78 ff.

[22] Dahrendorf, R. (1996), Zu einer Theorie des sozialen Konflikts. *Konflikttheorien.* Bonacker, T. (edt.). Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien, pp. 279-295; Pondy, L.R. (1967). Organizational conflicts: concepts and methods. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 12, pp. 296-320.

[23] Glasl, F. (2020), *Konfliktmanagement: ein Handbuch für Führung, Beratung und Mediation (12th ed.).* Bern – Haupt – Stuttgart: Verlag Freies Geistleben, pp. 243 ff; Proksch, S. (2016). *Conflict Management.* Cham: Springer, pp. 7 f.
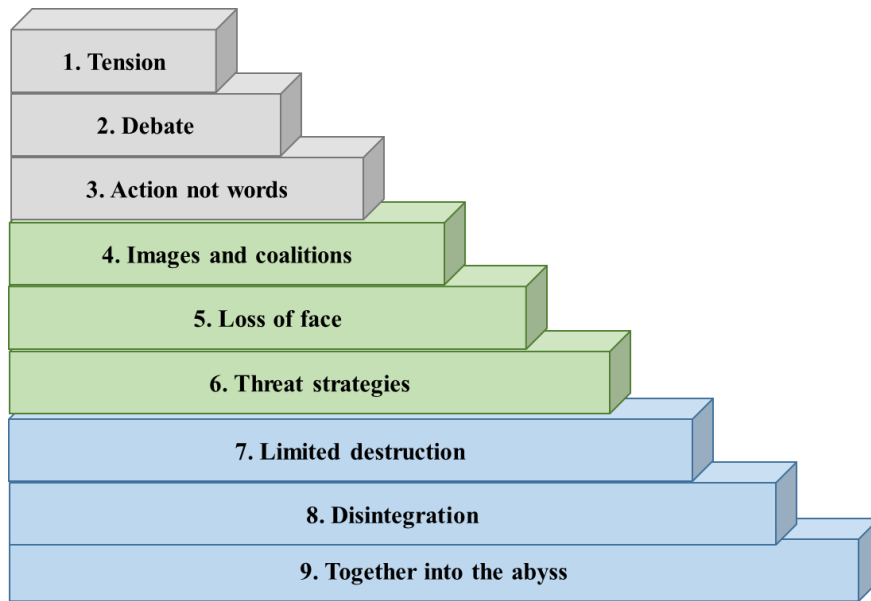
Figure 3: Stages of conflict

At stage 4, which is called **images and coalitions**, the conflict is no longer about concrete issues, but about victory or defeat. Defending one's reputation is a major concern. The images are now stereotypical, highly fixed and very resilient to change. The conflict parties start to attribute collective characteristics, both to members of the other side and to ingroup members. The negative images are now screens that occupy the field of vision whenever the parties meet each other. These screens prevent the parties from seeing each other's true complexity and individuality. During this stage, the parties actively try to enlist support from bystanders and the conflict activities are now focused on affecting the counterpart.

The transition to **stage 5** is dramatic. **Loss of face** means that the conflict parties feel that they have seen through the mask of the other party and discovered an immoral, insane or criminal inside. The whole conflict history is reinterpreted: one feels that the other side has followed a consequent and immoral strategy. They think that there are angels and devils involved in the conflict, representing two sides. One's own side is a representation of the good forces in the world, the other side represents the destructive and bestial forces. Loss of face and pursuing retaliatory acts often isolate the conflict parties from bystanders. The conflict parties develop **threat strategies at stage 6** and lose control over the course of events. They create pressure and act rapidly and radically. There is a serious risk that stress and complexity result in the disintegration of the parties.

Stage 7 leads to **limited destruction.** Threats turn into real attacks and the damage grows bigger. The parties are only able to reach lose – lose solutions, because the goal is to hurt the opponent. There is no chance to communicate anymore and no possibility to win the conflict. During **stage 8,** which is called **disintegration**, the attacks intensify and have the aim to destroy the counterpart. Only one's own survival is important. This survival instinct changes at **stage 9. Together into the abyss** is the central interest, because there is no returning back to a normal respectful relationship. Instead of having a conflict, the parties fight against each other like they are in war, without scruples, remorse and ethics.

5. FINDING AN APPROPRIATE DISPUTE RESOLUTION TOOL

As long as the dispute is still on level 1 to 3 the parties can either solve their conflict on their own or use moderation as an appropriate method. Conflicts in phases 3 to 5 have the chance to be solved with the help of a process conciliator (process or sociotherapeutic process consultation). A conflict that is in phases 5 to 7 can be dealt with mediation. If the conflict intensifies, the conflicting parties increasingly lose the ability to settle the conflict without outside intervention. At phase 6 of the escalation model, the parties are no longer able to resolve the dispute without outside help. However, the neutral "mediator role" without decision-making power is sufficient. From phase 6 onwards, the conflicting parties should generally think about "delegating" the decision to a third party. In phases 8 and 9 the dispute will have to be decided by the ordinary courts or an arbitration tribunal. These disputes can also be dealt with the decision of an intervening power. With regard to the choice of conflict resolution options, preference should generally be given to those that aim at a consensus. It is essential to note that the conflicting parties can be in different phases. This means, it is possible that A is already thinking of filing a lawsuit (phase 7), while B perceives the conflict as less escalating (phase 5).[24]

Alberstötter[25] created a similar model, especially for conflicts between parents, summing up the escalation process to 3 levels. During the first stage of the model it comes to a hardening between those involved in the conflict (level 1: sporadic words and actions against one another). As a next step, the field of conflict is expanded (level 2: hurtful actions and expansion of the field of conflict), until one can speak of a relationship war (level 3: relationship war - fight at any price), in which revenge and active destruction dominate. This information helps in the following with the decision on the most appropriate and promising conflict resolution strategy.

6. CONCLUSIONS

When people live together, conflicts and contradictions are indispensable. At the same time, conflicts can have positive effects. If people are sensitized to the possible causes and types of conflicts, the escalation dynamics as well as different resolution methods, they are more likely to find sustainable solutions.[26] By using the above described techniques, tools and models, it is possible to approach conflicts from an analytical angle. This helps to take a step back, to reflect and to make choices about the most appropriate dispute resolution method. The model of Glasl on the escalation phases[27] can provide especially useful guidance in the process. It shows that at the beginning of the resentment phase (1-3) self-help is possible to find a win-win outcome.[28] Towards the end of this phase and during the next phases (3-6) a neutral third party (a mediator) is necessary to settle the conflict. Once

[24] Glasl, F. (1982), The process of conflict escalation and roles of third parties. *Conflict Management and Industrial Relations.* Bomers, G. & Peterson, R. (edt.). Dordrecht: Springer-Science + Business Media, pp. 132 ff; Glasl, F. (2015). *Selbsthilfe in Konflikten. Konzepte – Übungen – Praktische Methoden (7th ed.).* Bern: Haupt Verlag, pp. 137 ff.

[25] Alberstötter, U. (2006), Wenn Eltern Krieg gegen einander führen. *Eskalierte Elternkonflikte. Beratungsarbeit im Interesse des Kindes bei hoch strittigen Scheidungen.* Weber M. & Schilling H. (edt.). Weinheim and Munich: Juventa, p. 36.

[26] Schwarz, G. (2014), *Konfliktmanagement. Konflikte erkennen, analysieren, lösen (9th ed.).* Wiesbaden: Springer pp. 39 ff.

[27] See chapter 4.

[28] Love, L. & Stulberg, J. (2019), Using Mediation for Advantage. *Negotiation Essentials for Lawyers.* Kupfer Schneider A. & Honeymann Ch. (edt.). Chicago: American Bar Association, p. 299.

the destruction, the lose-lose phase, is reached (7-9), only a powerful intervention that forcibly separates the conflict parties can help.

It is, for example, not advisable to file a lawsuit if the conflict has only reached stage 4, since it might be solved with less invasive methods that preserve the decision-making autonomy of the parties. On the other hand, a lot of effort and resources can be saved if the parties do not try to solve their highly escalated (stage 8) conflict by using mediation. Moreover, a respectful, open and curious way of communicating helps to gather the necessary information needed for conflict analysis, prevent the conflict from escalating and most importantly, brings the solution one step closer.

In summary, as described, refraining from conflict diagnosis can lead to various difficulties, including not solving the conflict at all. Therefore, the ability to diagnose conflicts is an asset for anyone who wants to succeed in their personal, academic and/or professional life.