



CONFLICT DIAGNOSIS

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INTRODUCTION

a. Social and practical relevance of the specific topic addressed

Conflict diagnosis is an important topic for everyone. Whenever people meet (may it be at the workplace, at university, within families, with friends, etc.) there is the possibility of disputes to arise. It is an asset to be able to analyze these conflicts in order to subsequently deescalate and solve them. Especially people working in leading or counseling positions (e.g. employees of human resources departments, social workers, lawyers) find themselves often confronted with different conflict situations. In order to react adequately and/or give good advice it is necessary to understand the dynamics behind the problem. 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. Diagnosing conflicts is therefore a great support in making smart decisions when solving disputes.

b. Need assessment

A European-wide survey among 340 students with different study backgrounds (conducted in the course of this ERASMUS+ project) shows the importance of the topic. More than half of the students (54%) answered that they do not think that their university pays sufficient attention to the development of soft skills of the students. The soft skill “conflict management” was chosen by 13% of the students as a skill they would like to develop. This seems comprehensible, since unsolved conflicts in organizations lead, inter alia, to a loss of productivity and higher sickness rates, which ultimately results in high conflict costs and therefore people with the skill to diagnose und manage conflicts are very popular and in demand on the labor market.

c. Main goals and learning outcomes

The main goal when teaching students conflict diagnosis is to enable them to analyze conflict situations from various angles. They can identify the current circumstances of the conflict, which type of conflict they are dealing with, what level of escalation it has reached and which procedure of dispute resolution would possibly be most appropriate to achieve a satisfying outcome for the parties involved.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO SELF-ASSESSMENT BY STUDENTS

Self-assessment and self-awareness activities and tasks are important to include in teaching in order to enable your students to make progress in studying.

One example of a group self-assessment of preliminary knowledge could be the exercise “rumor mill”. The class is divided into small groups (3-5 people in each group) and is asked to write down on a flipchart paper what “rumors” they have heard about a certain topic. Afterwards, the flipchart papers

will be put up in class and discussed together with the teacher. This way, it can be seen what level of knowledge the groups already possess and what aspects of the topic need further clarification or explanation.

Another example to encourage self-assessment is to ask students after practical tasks (such as active listening) to tell you themselves

- what they have done well (“I was good at summarizing what my exercise-partner said.”),
- what they would like to improve, phrased in a positive way (“Next time I will ask more open questions.”), and
- their learning outcome from the exercise (“I have learned that people open up more easily if you pay attention only to them and their story instead of being distracted by your phone or other things.”).

CONFLICT DIAGNOSIS

a. Symptoms of poor conflict diagnosis

If conflicts are not diagnosed right (or not at all) before taking action various problems might occur.

- The conflict might not be solved at all, because the real cause of the dispute was not found.
- The false dispute resolution method or strategy might be chosen if the level of conflict escalation is not diagnosed. This means there might be either too less or too much of intervention by a third party, which could again lead in the first case to the dispute not being solved at all. In the second case an intervention, e.g. by the court, might damage the relationship between the conflicting party, although they would have been able to solve their problem in an amicable way.
- One or more of the conflicting parties may be very unsatisfied with the outcome of the chosen method/strategy, since their needs and interests in solving the dispute were not identified right or not at all.

b. Elements of effective conflict diagnosis

Effective conflict diagnosis includes

- Identifying the circumstances of the case (what causes the conflict, who is part of the conflict, how are their roles defined, what are the relations between them, what are their interests and needs in solving the dispute etc.)
- Identifying the type of conflict (inter- or intrapersonal, structural, distributional etc.)
- Identifying the current stage of the conflict (level of escalation, are parties willing to cooperate etc.)

c. Examples from real life – common mistakes

A common mistake that is made when conflicts within organizations occur is the wrong analysis of the conflict cause, respectively conflict type. For example, when co-workers are having a dispute it might often seem like a personal conflict between them, while the real cause of the problem lies within the structure of the organization. It could be that the roles of the employees are organized in a way that they inevitably constrain each other when fulfilling their tasks. Trying to find a consensus on a personal level without working on the structural problem will not work.

Another mistake would be to refer parties of a dispute to the court, although the level of escalation of their dispute would allow them still to find a solution with the help of e.g. mediation. In practice, many people do not know about the alternatives when (legal) problems arise and therefore immediately think about court proceedings that should actually be ultima ratio.

SPECIFIC ACTIONS TO BE TAKEN TO INCREASE THE ABILITY TO DIAGNOSE CONFLICTS

- Practice active listening (summarizing, paraphrasing and questioning)
- Learn about different types of conflicts
- Learn about different dispute resolution methods (e.g. mediation, arbitration, conciliation, court proceedings)
- Learn about different models to analyze conflicts (e.g. Glasl, Schwarz)
- Study real case examples
- Practice with mock cases

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EXERCISE 1

ACTIVE LISTENING

In small groups, the students practice "one-sidedly controlled dialogue" and active listening.

- Student A is a sender and tells of a professional or personal conflict.
- Student B is the receiver, s/he listens and gives short summaries about feelings and thoughts, checking her/his understanding of what s/he heard.
- Student C is an observer.

Each member of the group should play each role at least once.

Notes for the trainers:

Note that the participants stick to the guidelines and point out that this is an exercise that is not practiced in this extreme form in everyday life. The focus is on practicing active listening and not on the chosen

topic. Make it clear to the participants that with the "acoustic nod" the exercise is not yet done, but the participants should practice repeating and summarizing.
After completing the exercise, brief feedback on the exercise in the plenum.

EXERCISE 2

ANALYSING CONFLICT SITUATIONS

The trainer has to divide the students in groups of two. The groups have to discuss, if the situation is a conflict and how intense the conflict is. Furthermore, the students can classify, if it is a social or inner and a hot or a cold conflict.

1. A colleague interrupts the conversation with you every time another person comes near the two of you.
2. At the end of a working day colleague A always finds excuses to go home very quickly, so that B always has to tidy up on his/her own on the premises.
3. You are urgently dependent on Mr. X taking you to work in the city. However, he often arrives late at the agreed meeting point, so that not only he, but also you, are often late.
4. You are three non-smokers and one smoker in an office. The person smoking constantly lights a cigarette even though it disturbs the others.
5. Once again, a colleague has not put an office device / tool that you urgently need in the right place.
6. You are urgently dependent on the preparatory work of your colleague during your work assignment. He reports (as is so often the case) that he is sick again on Monday.
7. A customer wants to exchange a pair of shoes bought several days earlier in the shoe store, which the seller refuses to do.
8. A daughter asks her father whether she can stay out longer, even though her school performance is underwhelming. The request is rejected. The daughter sees no connection between the two problems. A "sharp" argument begins.
9. A mother asks her son to buy something. The son says he doesn't feel like it because he wants to meet friends in the afternoon.
10. A couple argues over the amount of the household allowance. He: "You spend too much!" - You: "You give me too little!"