Session: How Leaders Understand and Manage Conflict

Instructor: Lee A. Learman, MD, PhD, FACOG Virginia Tech Carilion School of Medicine

Date: Tuesday, February 17, 2026, 12:15 pm - 1:45 pm

Advance Preparation:
1. Read the syllabus and assigned articles on cognitive biases and team conflict.
2. Answer the 5 reflection questions in the syllabus.
3. Complete the conflict inventory from Style Matters, using the coupon code we sent you.
4. Review the personalized conflict inventory report including Calm and Storm Scores.
5. Review the website's 3-minute PowerPoint or Prezi on "Intro to Conflict Style"

What to Bring to the Session:
1. Answers to the 5 reflection questions in this syllabus
2. Your Style Matters conflict inventory Calm Scores and Storm Scores.
3. Case handouts on conflict management (from the syllabus folder)

Introduction
Conflict is inevitable in complex organizations including academic health centers, medical schools and training programs, and is major focus of work effort in organizational leadership. Successfully managing conflict to minimize its consequences is critically important for academic leaders. This session is designed to improve scholars' awareness of the cognitive and motivational underpinnings of conflict, enhance their appreciation of individual conflict management styles, improve their preparation to successfully navigate conflict scenarios, and become aware of team-building activities to minimize the negative impact of conflict.

Objectives
At the conclusion of this session scholars will be able to:
- Explain specific perceptual, cognitive and emotional causes of interpersonal and team conflict and identify a countermeasure for each
- Distinguish individual styles for managing conflict, the situations in which they are the most helpful, and how their personal style varies across situations
- Discuss how fostering interdependence among team-members can lay the groundwork for improved conflict management
- Apply new insights to reframe and resolve conflict in case scenarios

Keywords
Conflict management, stereotyping, unconscious bias, cognitive bias, hierarchy of needs, motivation, relational coordination

Instructional Approach
The syllabus, assigned pre-readings and interactive didactic segments during the session aim to establish new insights and encourage new habits of thinking that will help scholars reframe past and future conflicts. Our large group discussion will invite scholars to share the insights they gain about their personal conflict management styles in calm situations and when tensions are high. In small groups scholars will work collaboratively to propose and practice techniques for addressing a sample of typical conflict scenarios encountered by academic leaders.

Assigned Pre-Session Readings (29 pages)

- The syllabus: pages 3-8 present tools from the literature to help understand and manage conflict. **6 pages**

- "It is time to talk about people: a human-centered healthcare system" by Meghan Searl and colleagues. *Health Res Policy Syst*. 2010:8:35**. 7 pages**
This commentary reframes human errors in healthcare and reviews the most common systematic cognitive biases that make people "predictably irrational." These same biases, and our efforts to hide or rationalize them, predispose to conflict.

- "Conflict in medical teams: opportunity or danger?" by Lindred Greer and colleagues. *Med Educ.* 2012;46(10):935-42. **8 pages**

- "Surgeons managing conflict in the operating room: defining the educational need and identifying effective behaviors." by David Rogers and colleagues. *Am J Surg.* 2013; 205(2):125-30. **6 pages**
These articles use real-world examples to illustrate the individual and team psychology of conflict. Greer presents a framework for understanding conflict within groups. Rogers suggests six evidence-based tools for resolving conflict in surgical settings.

- "When Teammates Don't Connect: Learning to Manage Interdependence" published in a blog by Tony Suchman. **2 pages**
The evidence-based organizational strategy of relational coordination has been applied successful to the airline and health care industries. This strategy relies on interdependence of team members, i.e., how well each team member understands the roles of other team members and how they affect each other's ability to deliver their best work. Suchman recommends a series of questions to foster healthy interdependence and optimum team performance. These structured conversations include explicit navigation of the natural conflicts that may emerge among team members with diverse contributions to the whole.

Your Personal Conflict Style Inventory

- Complete the conflict inventory from Style Matters, using the coupon code we sent you.
- Review your personalized report including Calm Scores and Storm Scores.
- Review the website's 3-minute PowerPoint or Prezi on "Intro to Conflict Style".

Assigned Reflection Questions
1. Describe one conflict experience that was charged with negative emotion, and one that was not. Reflect on what made the two experiences so different.
2. Recall a time when you clarified a difference in perspective to reveal and more valid understanding of the situation.
3. Describe a situation where you jumped to conclusions and regretted your actions. Which "systematic cognitive biases" might have been responsible?
4. Recall a time when you could not focus on fixing a higher-order problem until your more basic needs were met.
5. Identify a team you belong to, or lead, that would benefit from deepening each member's understand of the work of the other team members (see Suchman reading and questions at end of this syllabus).

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Understanding and Managing Conflict

A. Conflict - Why All the Fuss? Leaders Reframe Conflict as an Opportunity.

Consider the first time you found yourself in a heated disagreement with a friend or family member. Situations where emotions flare early in life produce some of the most vivid memories when later conflicts occur, and this can lead us to avoid the pain of conflict and disagreement even when as leaders we are charged to resolve them. Upon careful reflection what makes these events so painful it is usually not the disagreement itself; it is the feelings and behaviors that occurred as the conflict unfolded.

Sadly, there are few examples in public life showing us how to embrace conflict as a strategy for deepening our understanding of each other and the situation at hand. Instead, polarizing media personalities showcase irreconcilable disagreement and perpetuate a fiction: that only one position can be right, the other one must be wrong; and it is acceptable to bend the facts in order to win. They take a cynical view that seeking truth somewhere in the middle is nothing more than political correctness.

In the real world, resolving conflicts successfully requires careful, private communication that others rarely have a chance to observe. Consequently, it is hard to learn conflict management through an informal curriculum. Successful leaders benefit from formal skill development.

The first step is to move beyond the negative connotations generated by conflict. We must learn to flip a mental switch and reframe the situation. As long as there are people with unique life experiences and perspectives there WILL be conflict. Understanding the origins of conflict helps us understand each other better. Leaders reframe conflict and help others learn to do so.

Leaders Reframe Conflict

From perceiving conflict as always being…	*To perceiving conflict as being…*
A disruption of order, a negative experience, mistake in a relationship	An outgrowth of diversity that might hold possibilities for mutual growth in the relationship

| *From perceiving conflict as always being…*	*To perceiving conflict as being…*
A battle between incompatible self-interests or desires	One part of a relationship, a part that involves needs, values, perceptions, power, goals, feelings, and so on, not just interests or desires
An isolated event we allow to define the entire relationship	Occurrences that punctuate a long-term relationship and that can help clarify it
An I-versus-you battle for victory and/or advantage over adversaries	A shared *we* responsibility and opportunity to clarify and improve the relationship while resolving, with mutual benefit, particular conflicts arising within the relationship
Solely a rescue-squad reaction aimed at putting out conflict fires or temporarily fixing them	Both a proactive process through which healthy relationships can be built and strengthened and a process to deal effectively with conflicts once they occur
An event that begins when parties in conflict sit down to negotiate and ends when a temporary agreement is reached on a conflict	A process consisting of skills and steps taken both alone and with the other party before, during, and after working out a mutually, beneficial resolution to a conflict
A way of dealing with conflicts that focuses on making demands and then on trading portions of those demands to gain advantage	A process based on needs, both individual and shared, on clarified perceptions, on improving the relationship, and on mutual benefits, not domination

B. We are Hardwired for Conflict

How can my recollection of events be so different from yours? Research in social cognition, organizational psychology and neuroscience reveals some uncomfortable truths about the imperfect ways our brains perceive, store and recall information. We are hardwired to form categories, overgeneralize about characteristics of things and people within those categories, select evidence to support what we assume to be true from past experience, and be affected by the emotional state present at the time memories are stored and recalled. In short, these "systematic cognitive biases" distort the way we perceive reality, but we can develop countermeasures to minimize them.

Perceptual Underpinnings of Conflict: Our inherently limited perceptual systems narrow what we can focus on at any given moment and how deeply we can process what we perceive what we see and hear. Moreover, we are hard-wired to use superficial characteristics to categorize what we see and hear.

Countermeasure: Consider two individuals looking inside a box, one from the top (A) and one from the side (B). Observer A sees a circular object and concludes this must be a sphere. Observer B sees a triangular object. There appears to be a conflict between the conclusions they have drawn from observing the same object.

If they decide to defend their individual sense of "truth" both observers will miss the opportunity to get to the real truth. If instead they seek to understand their differences what can they infer? That either this is a magic trick or that an upside-down cone is sitting in that box.
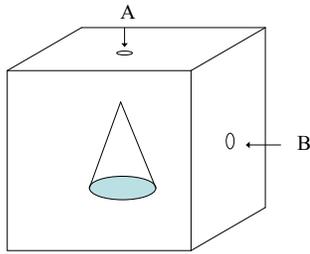

The Cone in A Box

Our narrow vantage point often lacks sufficient perspective to see the whole picture.

Adapted from Brown J. A Leader's Guide to Reflective Practice. Victoria, BC: Trafford Publishing, 2007.

Cognitive Underpinnings of Conflict: The "ladder of inference" depicted below was developed by an organizational psychologist (Chris Argyris). It reveals the steps by which we create a personal truth from the things we experience, i.e., how we jump to conclusions. The ladder is a simple model for understanding the complex mechanisms of social cognition (how our brains construct the world around us). Each wrung on the ladder reveal how bias and distortion contribute to our individual sense of reality.

First, we take the step from observing to selecting data. Our brains are wired to add meanings (personal and cultural) from which we make certain assumptions based on our past experiences. We use the assumptions to draw conclusions from what we observe. Over time, conclusions drawn from individual situations lead us to adopt beliefs and take actions based on those beliefs. Once beliefs are formed they influence the way we select and add meaning to new information. The cycle is self-perpetuating and reinforcing.
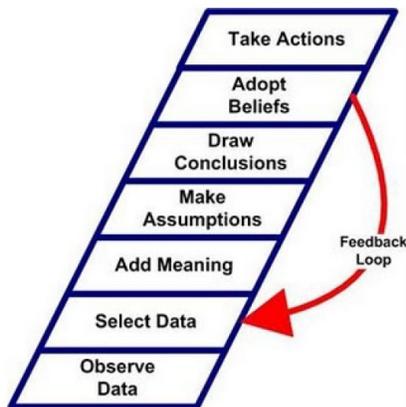
The Ladder of Inference

Our beliefs predispose us to focus on future data that perpetuate those beliefs, and ignore conflicting data that would support more accurate beliefs and intentional actions.

Adapted from Ross R. The Ladder of Inference. In Senge P, Kleiner A, Roberts C Ross R, Smith B. The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook. New York: Doubleday, 1994, p243.

The Fundamental Attribution Error biases our interpretation of success and failure. "Attribution" refers to why we think something happened. Was it the person or the situation? The "fundamental error" looks like this: When we see someone else mess up, we are more likely to blame them – "They must be clumsy." However, when we mess up we make the opposite interpretation – "I didn't see the rock. This is the first time I've tripped in 30 years." Because we know so much about ourselves it is easier to see tripping as caused by the specific situation. Because we know so little about the other person it is easier to see the lapse as a personal failing. Imagine what this bias does for us as role models when we're not at our best. Our students, residents and fellows will tend to think our impatience is attached to something about who we are (or who OBGYN's are), while we just as easily will blame fatigue or other situational stressors.

Countermeasure for Cognitive Errors: Find Your Inner "Spock": Each step up the ladder of inference makes the accuracy of our beliefs more precarious and subject to error. The countermeasures against inferential errors can be seen as making sure each step is taken on sure footing. A discipline of mindfulness and reflection can help reveal and correct potential distortions at each stop. Questions to keep in mind are:

- Were the data reliable and representative? Did something draw my attention to some information at the exclusion of other potentially useful data?
- How did my past experience with similar data influence the interpretation of what I saw this time? Would other meanings have been equally accurate?
- What did I assume to be true without any real supporting evidence? Did I overinterpret or overgeneralize? Did I fall victim to the Fundamental Attribution Error?
- Did I form beliefs prematurely before I could rigorously test my assumptions and look for contradictory information?
- Did I act before comparing my beliefs to others who observed the same situation?

C. Addressing One's Basic Needs is a Prerequisite for Managing Conflict

American psychologist and humanist Abraham Maslow (1908-1970) proposed a hierarchy of needs that has withstood the test of time over nearly 70 years since was first introduced. Maslow extended previous work by studying the underpinnings of emotional wellness and understanding which needs must be met for people to achieve their highest potential.

In 2013 a social psychologist (Matt Lieberman) challenged Maslow's placement of social needs above physical needs. He cited the hardwired human need for social connection from the very beginning of life and the importance to our species of creating large and complex social groups and organizations. At least in part, the need for approval and belonging was more powerful than the threat of preventable death from COVID-19 by a substantial proportion of the US population who declined vaccination.

When managing conflict, addressing physiologic needs, safety needs, belongingness and self-esteem will help the other person value learning from you, sharing their thought process with you, and working toward an equitable solution.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs
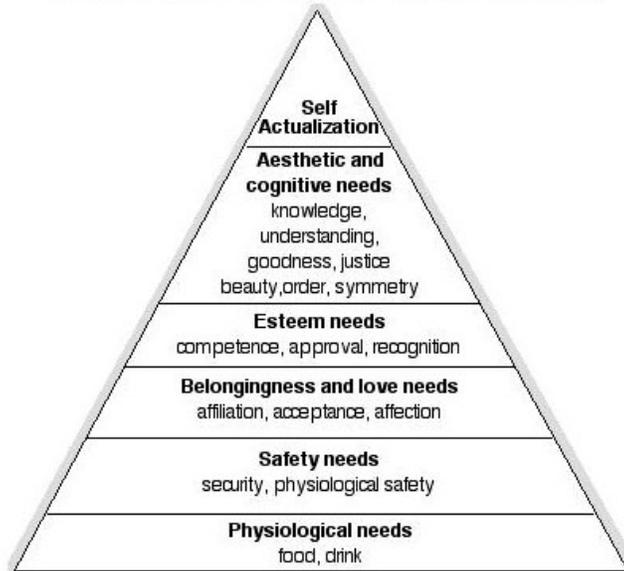
Conflict can occur when we perceive threats to our **safety and security, control and power, identity, recognition and sense of fair treatment.** Comparing these needs to the hierarchy allows us to understand how meeting more basic needs helps the other attend to higher-order needs.

Countermeasure: Address Unmet or Threatened Needs to Reframe the Conflict:
In addition to addressing differences in perspective (cone in the box) and potential cognitive errors (finding your inner Spock), consider whether the other individual's needs are not being met. Before you can appeal to the other person's sense of fairness and equity, consider whether they perceive a threat to their security and whether they feel accepted and valued by you as a leader. Statements and actions that fulfill the individual's more basic needs will allow them to "hear you" when you seek their understanding of your point of view.   Even in a polarized society disagreement can give way to just solutions, but not if more basic needs (acceptance, affiliation, esteem) remain unmet. Building trusting relationships is at the crux of meeting these needs.

P	Partnership	*We'll see this through together*
E	Empathy	*It sounds like that was frightening for you. I can feel your frustration as you talk.*
A	Acknowledgement	*You really worked hard on that.*
R	Respect	*I so respect your commitment (tenacity, quality of thinking, etc.)*
L	Legitimation	*This would be hard for anyone. Anyone would be upset with something like this happening.*
S	Support	*I'd like to help you with this.*

Adapted from: Clark W, Hewson M, Fry M, Shorey J. Communication Skills Reference Card. St. Louis: American Academy on Communication in Healthcare), 1998.

Use the PEARLS to help build relationships with individuals with whom you disagree. They are equally useful with patients and others for whom we care.

A final thought. Don't be fooled by assuming a highly accomplished learner, colleague or superior has their basic needs met. A continuing search for acceptance, approval and recognition can motivate high achievement, perhaps just as much as a personal quest toward reaching one's fullest human potential (self-actualization).

D. Putting it All Together in a Disciplined Conversation

We've reviewed the underpinnings of conflict and the importance of understanding the role of perceptual limitations, cognitive errors, motivational needs, and our own preferred style for handling conflict. Keeping so many considerations in mind can be challenging. Fortunately, developing, practicing, and using 3 core skills can bring order and discipline to conversations where parties initially disagree.

Three Core Skills for Disciplined Conversations

Skilled Inner Listening
⇒ Notice your own inner reactions to what's said
⇒ Analyze internally: "What's the story I'm telling myself?"
⇒ Neutral disclosure (use non-judgmental language to describe your reactions)

Skilled Inquiry
⇒ Ask questions from a place of not knowing the answers
⇒ Ask questions that only the other person could know the answer to

Skilled Advocacy
⇒ Explain the structure of your thinking
⇒ Ask for help in understanding your thinking

Adapted from Ross R, Roberts C. Balancing Inquiry and Advocacy. In Senge P, Kleiner A, Roberts C Ross R, Smith B. *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*. New York: Doubleday, 1994, p253-259.

E. Laying the Groundwork to Minimize Conflict and Optimize Its Value

Structured conversations can help team members understand the needs and roles of each other and how each person affects each other person's ability to deliver their best. These conversations support the creation of relationally coordinated work that minimizes conflict while normalizing the reality that team members may, at times, be at cross purposes. Consider laying a relational groundwork on one of your teams by fostering one-on-one conversations about interdependence in which the team members ask each other these questions:

• What are your deliverables?
• What do you find most meaningful about your work?
• What is it about how I do my work that helps you do yours?
• What can I do differently that would help you even more?
• When does our work seem to be well-aligned and when do we seem to be at cross purposes?

Adapted from "When Teammates Don't Connect: Learning to Manage Interdependence," a blog posted by Tony Suchman on January 1, 2013.