Problem Solving and Conflict Resolution in Groups

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This reading begins by describing the strengths and weaknesses of groups as problem solvers. According to the author, the decision to use a group for problem solving is determined by balancing the characteristics of a particular problem against the characteristics of a group. The reading also identifies and compares three modes of conflict resolution: smoothing and avoidance, bargaining and forcing, and confronting and problem solving. Interdepartmental conflict and the difficult position of department representatives are also examined. The author closes with a reminder of the importance of careful diagnosis and with several suggestions for managers on how to constructively influence group behavior.

Management groups deal with organizational problems in a wide variety of ways. Clearly, some styles of problem solving are more effective than others, and some management groups are much more capable of handling and resolving internal conflict than others are. Because group decision making is so common in organizations, effective managers must be highly skilled at influencing group processes.

This reading examines the characteristics of managerial groups that enhance and detract from their effectiveness in problem solving and describes the most common ways in which groups handle conflict. The reading explains how styles of problem solving and conflict resolution affect the nature and quality of group decisions. The dynamics of interdepartmental conflict are also examined because most important organizational problems involve two or more departments with differing goals, priorities, and needs. Although many of the ideas covered here refer primarily to interactions in face-to-face meetings, the same processes generally apply to group behavior over extended periods of time.

1. The next two sections on the strengths and weaknesses of groups as problem solvers draw heavily, although not exclusively, on “Assets and Liabilities in Group Problem Solving,” by Norman R.F. Maier, Psychological Review (July 1967): 239-49. The article is a systematic review of research on group problem-solving behavior and effectiveness in a wide variety of contexts.
STRENGTHS OF GROUPS AS PROBLEM SOLVERS

Group problem solving has some distinct advantages over individual problem solving in organizations. The most compelling reasons for using a management group to deal with organizational problems are as follows:

Diversity of Problem-Solving Styles  Different people have different ways of thinking about problems. Although almost any problem can be viewed from several different perspectives, most people have relatively fixed patterns of thinking. Some people (e.g., engineers and accountants) rely on highly quantitative techniques. Other people (e.g., architects and designers) think graphically, using pictures and diagrams, while others (e.g., entrepreneurs and commodity traders) tend to rely on feelings and intuition about what will work in a given situation.

Individual problem solvers too often fall into ruts that prevent them from seeing other productive ways of dealing with a particular problem. When people with different styles interact with others in a group, however, they can stimulate one another to try new ways of approaching the problem.

More Knowledge and Information  Individuals also bring different specialized knowledge and current experiences to a problem-solving discussion. Even when some group members are much more highly skilled or formally educated than others, the diversity of the knowledge, skills, and thinking styles in the group can lead to more innovative solutions than the experts could produce working alone. For example, a sales manager who has worked closely with customers may be able to suggest product-design modifications that would not have occurred to a product engineer.

Furthermore, by exchanging tentative ideas as they explore the problem and possible solutions, group members can challenge and improve one another's thinking. During a discussion, one person's comment often triggers a new idea for someone else. This process of sharing and building increases both the number and the quality of solution ideas.

Greater Understanding and Commitment  By participating in the deliberations that lead to a decision, people gain a more thorough understanding of the problem. Furthermore, even if they disagree with the decision, they are more likely to accept it if they have had an opportunity to express their disagreement during the decision process. Participation is one of the main reasons that task forces are so often successful in achieving organizational changes.

WEAKNESSES OF GROUPS AS PROBLEM SOLVERS

Many management groups develop patterns of behavior that seriously detract from their problem-solving effectiveness. Among the most important weaknesses of group problem solving are the following:
Use of Organizational Resources  Group decision making consumes more
time and resources than does individual problem solving. After all, a one-hour
meeting of eight people requires as much time as one person working all day
on the problem. Furthermore, achieving an equal and adequate understanding
of the problem by all members of the group can be difficult and time-consuming.

Pressure to Conform  Groups often develop such strong norms of con-
formity that members spend more time and energy figuring out the party line
than they do analyzing a problem. Agreeing becomes more important than
being right, and conforming to the majority point of view becomes a require-
ment for remaining part of the group. Conformity is a particular danger in
management groups whose members differ in their levels of authority, status,
and power. Less-powerful members may find it especially difficult to confront
or disagree with their organizational superiors.

Extensive research on group decision making has repeatedly shown
that the solution or argument mentioned most frequently in a group is almost
always the one finally chosen, regardless of its validity. This valence effect is
particularly pervasive in overly conforming groups.

Advocacy and Individual Domination  Perhaps the most common weak-
ness of problem-solving groups is their susceptibility to control by individuals
or small coalitions. Decision making turns into a contest in which winning
becomes more important than being right. Individuals advocate their own
points of view, vying for leadership to satisfy personal needs or to achieve
organizational influence that benefits one group or department rather than the
total organization.

Although a group discussion may appear to focus on substantive issues
and the pros and cons of each alternative, the debates may involve underlying
issues of power, prestige, and influence. If a domination attempt is being made
based on information or ideas directly related to the focal problem, the group
may actually benefit. Often, however, those who argue loudest and strongest
do so precisely because of the logical weaknesses of their positions.

Diffusion of Responsibility  Group members often lose their individual
identities and sense of responsibility during problem-solving deliberations.
Discussion may move so swiftly that members forget who initiated certain
ideas; most finished ideas are combinations of several peoples’ recommenda-
tions. Although this process can be highly creative, it also can lead to a group’s
reaching riskier decisions than any of its members would have agreed to
individually. Under these circumstances, a group can make poor decisions.
Individual members will usually deny personal responsibility for the decisions
and their consequences.

Groups Are Solution Oriented  Most people feel unsettled by problems
and dislike being faced with them. Thus, many management groups tend to
short-circuit problem analysis, jumping quickly to solution proposals. Experienced
managers often feel sure they know what the problem is and thus are opposed to spending time exploring its underlying causes. Often, of course, the problem as it is first defined is only a symptom of a much bigger and more complex situation. Yet when problem-solving groups are formed, they rarely spend enough time exploring the problem.

WHEN TO USE A GROUP

In many organizational situations, a manager has little choice about whether to handle a problem alone, assign it to a single subordinate, or involve a group. Organizational traditions frequently restrict the manager’s options; almost every company has standing committees, regular staff meetings, and other settings that bring together specialists from different functional or geographic areas to address both recurring and isolated problems. In other situations, the pressures of time and individual responsibility, the need for specific expertise, or the requirements of confidentiality clearly point to an individually determined decision. Between these two extremes, however, are situations in which a manager must decide whether an individual or a group effort will be more productive.

The choice of when to refer a particular problem to a management group depends upon both the characteristics of the problem and the skills and interests of the group. The most important factors in each of these areas are discussed in the following sections.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PROBLEM

The nature of the problem and the organizational requirements for a solution define the primary criteria for determining whether to use a group problem-solving process.

Complexity, Uncertainty, and Conflict  Organizational problems can usually be described as involving uncertainty, complexity, or conflict. Uncertain problems are those in which the problem solver lacks information about underlying causes, potential solutions, or even solution criteria. Complex problems are those in which more is known about related causes and possible choices; however, so many factors affect the situation that their interactions and consequences are difficult to trace and to understand. Conflict problems are those in which different individuals or subgroups have differing priorities or goals that cannot be mutually satisfied. In conflict situations both the choices and their consequences may be very clear; the difficulty lies in choosing among the alternatives and in determining how to make that choice when competing goals and interests are at stake.
Most real-world problems involve all three of these elements, although in varying degrees. Defining the problem in terms of its uncertainty, complexity, and conflict potential helps clarify what additional information is needed, who possesses it, and who is affected by the problem (or will be affected by its solution). Generally, the more uncertain, the more complex, and the more conflictual the problem, the more likely it is that involving others in developing a solution will be appropriate and effective.

**Business Stakes** The more important the problem, the more appropriate it is to involve others in its solution. Problems with higher organizational stakes (whether tangible outcomes, such as costs, profits, and market share, or intangible ones, such as public reputation, status, and power) call for more thorough analysis, wider awareness of issues, and shared responsibility for solutions and their consequences. A group process is much more likely to be effective when the risks and potential payoffs are large because group members will pay more attention, take more time, and devote more energy to finding a widely acceptable solution.

**Task Interdependence** When a work procedure or information system crosses department boundaries, procedural changes are almost impossible without bringing together people from all the affected departments. Imagine a materials-control manager attempting to modify an inventory-control system without involving sales, accounting, purchasing, manufacturing, and production control. Each department will be affected by the system changes and can influence the success of the implementation effort. The problem cannot be resolved by one manager in one functional area.

**Need for Acceptance and Commitment** Another reason for using a group process is that those people who have been involved in the group deliberations will better understand the problem and its solution and will more readily accept and support the group decision. This aspect of group problem solving is especially important when the solution includes an implementation effort involving several people. When many of those people are not direct subordinates of the manager who is responsible for making the change, their acceptance and commitment is doubly important.

**Deadline Pressures** Group processes consume more managerial time and related organizational resources than does individual problem solving. If a decision deadline is too immediate, involving others may be impossible even though the problem is substantive and calls for their inclusion. However, a tight deadline may be a compelling reason for bringing in more people. If their understanding of the problem is adequate, the group members can divide up the work and attack several aspects of it simultaneously.

To summarize, a group problem-solving process is generally called for when
• the problem is uncertain or complex, and has potential for conflict
• the problem requires interdepartmental or intergroup cooperation and coordination
• the problem and its solution have important personal and organizational consequences
• there are significant but not immediate deadline pressures
• widespread acceptance and commitment are critical to successful implementation.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE GROUP

Organizational problems do not develop in a vacuum, and management groups differ in their abilities to work on various kinds of problems. Several important characteristics of problem-solving groups also influence the decision to use a group process.

Relevant Knowledge and Skills  The most obvious criterion is whether the group possesses the knowledge and skills to solve the problem productively. This is not a simple issue, however, because individuals often have greater problem-solving capabilities than they have previously demonstrated. Furthermore, groups develop problem-solving skills primarily through practice.

Unfortunately, the immediate need to solve a problem and stabilize the organization often overshadows the longer-term developmental needs of a group. Managers frequently justify individual problem solving through lack of time, group work overload, and the group’s lack of knowledge and experience. However, when developing the group’s problem-solving skills is an important objective, the manager should consciously submit to the group those problems whose nature might otherwise suggest individual attention.

Current Work Load  If a group is already working at or near its normal capacity, then adding another important problem to the group’s agenda will generally be ineffective. Not only would the problem receive inadequate attention and effort, but other group tasks will probably suffer as well. An overloaded group is generally characterized by high levels of stress, and high stress typically leads to brief and shallow diagnosis, a preference for solutions that are simple and certain (rather than creative and effective), and unusually severe and inflexible conflict. Overloaded groups are not effective problem solvers.

Group Expectations  Company norms sometimes value group participation in certain kinds of decisions, regardless of whether that participation improves the quality of the solution. In fact, many of the tensions that develop between managers and subordinates derive from differing assumptions about the appropriateness of group participation in certain types of decisions. Thus, a manager must be concerned not only with the substance of a problem but also
with its emotional components. If a group feels strongly about its right to be involved in a decision, the manager must take that into account, whether or not he or she agrees with the group.

Norms for Conflict Resolution Perhaps the most critical aspect of a group's problem-solving capacity is its approach to handling conflict. Group decision making is especially difficult when group members have different and/or conflicting goals and needs. If the problem can potentially create serious and heated controversy and the group is not skilled at confronting its differences, a group solution will probably not be effective. A group that has developed healthy confronting norms, however, can be an appropriate forum for reviewing an issue with many alternative solutions.

Because conflict-resolution skills are critical to group problem-solving effectiveness, the next section describes alternative modes for handling conflict.

Thus, a management group is more likely to develop an effective solution to an organizational problem if

- group members possess the required knowledge and analytic skills or are capable of developing them
- the group is not already overloaded with other work
- the group's expectations about involvement are taken into account
- the group is skilled at resolving conflict and is characterized by open, confronting norms.

The manager's task is to find the most workable fit between the problem and the problem-solving group. Neither element can be addressed in isolation, and none of the specific characteristics described earlier can be treated independently of the others. Because an ideal fit almost never occurs on its own, much of the manager's work involves trying to modify one or more of these characteristics. Finding the leverage points is not simple, and there are no formulas that will substitute for careful diagnosis of the most important elements in each situation.

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MODES OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Because styles of problem solving and conflict resolution are such important variables in determining group effectiveness, they are among the most frequently studied aspects of group behavior. The literature on management groups contains numerous models of problem solving, group and intergroup conflict, bargaining, and techniques for managing conflict.

Research on styles of group problem solving suggests that there are three primary modes of conflict resolution: bargaining and forcing, smoothing and avoiding, and confronting and problem solving. As the labels indicate, confronting and problem solving is by far the most effective approach (though by no means the most common). This assertion...
body of research. For example, Lawrence and Lorsch, in their extensive study of product innovation groups in several different industries, found that the management groups of the more-profitable firms invariably employed confronting styles of decision making more than other modes and generally did so more often than did the management groups of less-profitable competitors. In fact, the mode of conflict resolution that characterized a company's management groups was found to be the most consistent variable that discriminated between profitable and unprofitable companies in the different industries.

The remainder of this section describes each of these three modes in some detail and suggests their relative strengths and weaknesses as styles of conflict resolution.

SMOOTHING AND AVOIDANCE

A group employing smoothing tactics is more interested in maintaining harmony and agreement than in confronting the problem or the individual members' differences. Group members assume that conflict is destructive; because they value membership in the group, they avoid confronting their differences out of fear that the resulting conflict will split the group irreparably. People who favor smoothing over their differences often have little confidence in their own ability to articulate their reasoning or to persuade others of their position. They also assume that the group is generally incapable of dealing with problems that involve conflict.

Groups that develop a smoothing-and-avoidance style tend to favor the status quo; they work on maintaining an even keel and not rocking the boat. Such groups often redefine the problems they face so that minimum disagreement occurs; they develop powerful norms of avoiding conflict, withdrawing from controversial issues, and withholding critical comments. Members of a smoothing group describe their beliefs by quoting proverbs such as "Soft words win hard hearts," "Kill your enemies with kindness," and "Smooth words make smooth ways." (These and similar sayings were actually used to identify smoothing-and-avoiding groups in the Lawrence and Lorsch research and in earlier studies as well.)

Group members may privately express sharp criticisms of each other and even of the way they work as a group; however, these criticisms are kept private. Meetings are often perfunctory and always polite, although a sensitive observer can usually pick up nonverbal signals that contrast sharply with the surface verbal behavior. Even when the stakes are high for some members on a


particular issue, the pattern of smoothing is hard to break. Membership in a smoothing group can be extremely frustrating, especially for persons interested in making changes or improving organizational performance.

**BARGAINING AND FORCING**

In a group characterized by bargaining and forcing, the participants view each other as adversaries and define the problems in terms of what each person, subgroup, or department stands to gain or lose. Decision making is viewed as a win/lose proposition in which it is clearly better to win than to lose. Groups operating in this mode develop norms that justify pushing for one’s own point of view regardless of the merits of others’ views; forcing when one has an advantage and seeking compromise when one does not; concealing unfavorable information; and digging for data that the opponent is hiding.

The proverbs that typify a bargaining-and-forcing climate include “Tit for tat is fair play,” “Might overcomes right,” and “You scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours.” Conflict is viewed as inevitable, necessary, and even desirable; however, it is treated almost like a poker game in which one bluffs, conceals data, and seeks to scare the other participants out of the game. Most decisions are reached by making a series of compromises and trade-offs or by powerful parties forcing the issue. Participants assume the worst about each other, and each party seeks to maximize its own share of the “pot.”

The poker analogy is important and appropriate because groups operating in this mode seldom try to increase the total size of the pot or find a solution in which everyone wins. Attention tends to be concentrated on how to divide up limited resources, whether they are budgetary funds, sales territories, management bonuses, or intangibles such as prestige and status.

**CONFRONTING AND PROBLEM SOLVING**

Groups operating in a confronting mode assume that disagreements are healthy if they are worked through in pursuit of a solution that is good for the total organization. The basic difference between this orientation and the preceding ones is that here the individual parties recognize that their goals are interdependent and that it’s to everyone’s advantage in the long run if the total organization benefits. A confronting group believes that the solution will be better if each party is open about its needs and objectives and the differences causing the conflict. Emphasizing these differences clarifies goals and interests and leads to creative solutions. Confronting the differences helps individuals find areas of common interest as well; the parties explicitly search for ways to increase the total payoff so that everyone can win rather than merely argue over the relative shares of a fixed outcome.
The proverbs that typify this mode include “Come now and let us reason together,” “Try and trust will move mountains,” and “By digging and digging the truth is discovered.”

A problem-solving group focuses on the needs and objectives of the total organization as well as on those of each member. It also focuses on the relationships between the members, not on the individuals or their personalities. Group members recognize that the problem lies in their differences and interdependencies, rather than with any individuals or their positions. Furthermore, emphasis is on resolving the problem, not on merely accommodating different points of view.

A confronting style is risky and requires participants to challenge one another’s underlying values and assumptions and to share personal concerns and criticisms. Trust and integrity are essential to an effective confronting-and-problem-solving climate.

COMPARISONS AMONG THE THREE MODES

The three modes are, of course, prototypes or even stereotypes: Actual management groups often act in ways that contain elements of two or even all three of these modes. Most groups develop a predominant style, but typically each group has its own mixture of styles, which may vary over time or from problem to problem.

The Exhibit provides a shorthand means of comparing these three styles. Each style is characterized briefly in terms of the group’s way of defining the problem, the role of conflict, the attitudes of the participants, and the nature of the outcomes. The bottom two rows describe characteristic norms and representative proverbs that capture the beliefs and values implicit in the norms.

As noted earlier, the confronting-and-problem-solving mode is generally most effective for resolving group conflicts. However, there are also situations in which either a smoothing or a bargaining orientation is necessary. Consider a group faced with an unavoidable deadline and a decision that involves several mutually exclusive alternatives. The group may be forced to reach a decision without fully confronting all of the individual members’ positions and needs. Even if the members are adept at productive confrontation, the group leader may explicitly suppress conflict to reach a quick decision.

Clearly, however, there is a difference between a one-time, short-term strategy of avoiding differences in order to meet a deadline and the longer-term development of norms that continually suppress conflict. Using successive short-term crises to justify a smoothing leadership style can be dangerous: just a few short-term crises can create a long-term pattern.

Bargaining is probably the most common (though not necessarily the most effective) form of conflict resolution when the problem involves scarce resources and two or more departments in an organization. Budgets and sales
### EXHIBIT
**Modes of Conflict Resolution**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem</th>
<th>SMOOTHING AND AVOIDING</th>
<th>CONFRONTING AND PROBLEM SOLVING</th>
<th>BARGAINING AND FORCING</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Destructive</td>
<td>Define to minimize differences</td>
<td>Define relative to total organization's needs</td>
<td>Define in terms of stakes for each subgroup</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>Accommodators</td>
<td>Collaborators</td>
<td>Adversaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcomes</td>
<td>Maintain status quo</td>
<td>Interdependent; all benefit when total group benefits</td>
<td>Win/lose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Typical Norms</td>
<td>Withdraw when attacked</td>
<td>Confront differences</td>
<td>Push when you have the advantage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Avoid conflict</td>
<td>Be open and fair</td>
<td>Compromise when you do not</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Keep your tongue in check</td>
<td>Decide questions by reason, not by power</td>
<td>Maximize your own share</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representative Proverbs</td>
<td>Soft words win hard hearts</td>
<td>Come now, and let us reason together</td>
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*Source: Adapted from unpublished materials developed by John J. Gabarro*

territories are limited; organizational resources that go to one department obviously cannot go to another. In the absence of clear organizational priorities, bargaining is often the only means for resolving interdepartmental conflict. Bargaining can be particularly useful for groups that meet infrequently, when members do not know each other well or when the overall organization does not have a definite direction.

All too often, however, the bargaining climate degenerates into the kinds of forcing tactics described earlier. The game and winning become more important than achieving the best solution. The interests of the total group (and even of the subgroups) are lost in the battle to acquire scarce resources or to achieve organizational prominence.

Thus, even under these special circumstances, an open, confronting climate remains a desirable goal. It is an elusive goal, however, because an active confrontation of differences requires skilful participants. Open discussion of important differences is inherently stressful and productive only when group members possess both analytic and interpersonal skills. An effective problem-solving group continually risks falling apart in disagreement; creative problem solving is almost impossible without creative tension.
Managing group problem solving effectively is a challenge under any circumstances. The process is especially complex when the group is temporary and composed of people from several different primary groups. Most of the difficulties are heightened versions of those that arise within a single group; however, the differing orientations and goals of people from various departments complicate the process significantly.

INTERDEPARTMENTAL CONFLICT

The major sources of interdepartmental conflict include vying for scarce resources; differing interests and priorities; and different personal values, orientations, and styles of thinking and problem solving. Problem-solving groups composed of people from various functional areas clearly begin with a wider range of goals and opinions about the problem. In addition, the stakes are usually higher; the problems are usually more complicated, and individuals' positions on most issues are much less flexible.

Interdepartmental conflict stems from more than just differing goals and priorities, however. Natural differences in departmental size and power also affect the problem-solving process. Larger, more-powerful departments generally exercise greater control over joint operations and decision making. If one department depends on another for a critical resource (raw materials, information, or even people), it may often defer to that department to avoid losing critical resources. This kind of power imbalance frequently leads to decisions being determined by political clout rather than by their merits, and the company suffers as a result. Furthermore, one-sided control usually leads to resentment by the weaker department, and working relationships deteriorate as a result.

Differences in departmental work loads and stress can also contribute to conflict. An overworked department will generally be less open to change, and its members will be especially resentful of other departments' comparative lack of pressure. Furthermore, overworked departments are apt to resort either to bargaining-and-forcing or to smoothing-and-avoidance strategies. They do not have the time to work through differences more carefully.

DEPARTMENT REPRESENTATIVES

Given so many potential sources of conflict, it is easy to understand how difficult interdepartmental problem solving and decision making can be. In most situations what holds the group together is the recognition of a common
overriding interest in the success of the total organization. Often, however, that success is so taken for granted that individual departmental interests and prestige become more important. In interdepartmental decision making each group member acts as a representative of his or her home department. This role creates particular difficulties for the representatives, and these difficulties in turn affect their behaviors in the interdepartmental group.

Individual Problems of Department Representatives Each representative experiences internal conflict as he or she attempts to balance commitments to the home department with those to the interdepartmental group. To maintain membership in both groups each representative must conform to two sets of norms and expectations. Department representatives usually learn rather quickly how to vary their behavior and language depending on the group they are currently interacting with, but there are often times when conforming with one group's expectations places the representative directly at odds with the other group. For example, membership on a task force developing new sales forecasting methods may require a product manager to share marketing department data and procedures that reflect poorly on her own staff. More significantly, the marketing department may have a history of resolving internal conflict via hard-nosed bargaining, while the task-force group is being managed in a more open, confronting style. The product manager is caught in the middle. If she shares data openly with the task force, she risks being ostracized by her own department; yet, if she reflects her department’s bargaining stance, she will antagonize other task-force members and perhaps weaken her influence (and thus the marketing department’s influence) on the task force’s recommendations.

This dual membership problem puts a great deal of stress on department representatives. They must not only live with dual (and often conflicting) sets of goals, norms, and values but must also answer to two constituent groups for the actions they take and the decisions they make. Even when the representative disagrees with the position taken by one group, he or she must offer an explanation to the other group. Furthermore, each constituent group typically holds the representative responsible for all the actions and decisions of the other group. The representative is pressured by each group not only to explain its own position to the other group but also to influence the other group. Thus, each representative is a target for influence attempts from both directions, at the same time that he or she is trying to influence both the home department and the problem-solving group.

Relationship Problems of Department Representatives This internal conflict also contributes to several kinds of relationship problems for department representatives. The pressures they feel often lead them to interpret challenges or criticisms of their home departments as personal attacks. In fact, many managers do express procedural criticisms in a personal fashion. Because the representatives view each other as symbols of their respective departments,
substantive departmental conflicts often escalate quickly into emotional interpersonal disputes.

Another relationship problem arises when the representatives feel different levels of commitment to their two constituencies. Although some representatives remain oriented primarily toward their home departments, others develop more loyalty to the interdepartmental group. Group members may also differ in the degree of independence they have to make commitments on behalf of their departments and in the willingness of their departments to accept decisions of the interdepartmental group. These differences in orientation and influence further complicate the way the representatives are able to work with one another.

**Personal Skills of Department Representatives** The group and interpersonal skills of the individual department representatives will also affect their ability to work together. The greater the role conflict, the more important personal skills become. Perhaps the most essential characteristic for a representative is a high tolerance for stress, ambiguity, and conflict. Individuals who cannot live with competing goals, irreconcilable values, and unresolved organizational problems should probably avoid interdepartmental assignments. Representatives also must be good listeners. Understanding the needs and motives of others is an essential prerequisite to effective problem solving. Similarly, representatives must be able to explain their own positions and needs articulately and persuasively, and they must be capable of making quick, on-the-spot judgments. Interdepartmental groups usually make decisions that have major implications for individual departments; group members must be able to trace out the consequences of new ideas rapidly in order to influence group decisions as they occur.

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**MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS**

This reading has identified an extensive and diverse set of ideas for understanding group problem-solving behavior. Up to this point there have been few specific suggestions for how individual managers can develop and reinforce healthy problem-solving norms in groups. The reading has stressed the importance of careful diagnosis because the appropriateness of any particular action depends on the group's present skills and existing norms. However, several basic strategies for effectively influencing group behavior exist and can be employed by managers.

**Understand the Sources of Current Behavior** Both individuals and groups develop patterns of behavior that are useful to them. Thus, to change someone's behavior, you must first understand the reasons why that behavior is functional for that person. A manager cannot always change underlying conditions and personal characteristics; however, it is futile to try to influence
current behavior without understanding its sources and without considering how it benefits the individuals involved.

**Demonstrate Desired Behavior Yourself** Serving as a role model is a powerful way that a manager can affect his or her subordinates' behavior. An obviously capable and successful manager can have a significant impact on peers, and even on superiors, in the organization.

Concerning problem-solving behavior, this principle suggests demonstrating your own commitment to making decisions based on facts and objective criteria. Furthermore, if you stress your own interest in finding solutions that maximize the goals of the total organization, others will also become more aware of their common objectives. You can model problem-solving behavior in the following ways: Suggest several solution alternatives rather than just one; do your homework and present factual support for your suggestions; avoid becoming involved in coalitions and compromises; and define your underlying assumptions so that you and others can question their validity.

Underlying this suggestion is the assumption that a problem-solving orientation will in fact lead to effective decision making. Your own success will encourage others to act similarly and will lead to a more open, confronting set of decision-making norms and procedures.

**Monitor the Decision-Making Process** By increasing your sensitivity to the dynamics of a group's decision making, you can improve your ability to influence how the group works together. The counterpart of modeling problem-solving behavior is to insist on it in others as well. Press group members for factual evidence to back up their assertions; do not let minority views get squeezed out; work on achieving a balance of participation, and so on.

One of the most important aspects of group management is varying your style according to the particular phase of problem solving. During problem definition and solution finding, encourage open, nonevaluative exploration. Later, when a decision is required, press individuals to make personal commitments, and again make sure that minority concerns are fully aired before the group decision is considered final.

Although these suggestions are easiest to implement if you are the formal leader of the group, most of them can also be acted on by other members of the group. It may be more difficult for a member to influence group norms, but it is by no means impossible. The principles of effective problem solving that have been discussed in this reading have considerable legitimacy in our society; acting on these ideas will rarely be viewed as inappropriate behavior. In fact, just the opposite is true: By appealing to group members' personal values, you will generally gain much respect. Even when confronting strongly held opinions, you can succeed if you have done your own homework and know you stand on solid ground.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What cultural concepts might work against the practice of confronting and problem solving as a mode of conflict resolution?

2. Consider your personality, and using traits that you know define you best, decide which mode of conflict resolution you are most comfortable adopting. Ask your peers for feedback. (Do they see you as you see yourself?)

3. If a company discovered that its approaches to conflict resolution did not include confronting and problem solving, what steps might the organization take to include this mode in its culture?

4. According to the author, there are three modes of conflict resolution. Give an example when it might be advantageous to use smoothing and avoiding. Do the same for confronting and problem solving and for bargaining and forcing.

5. The reading mentions that confronting and problem solving as a mode of conflict resolution is an important characteristic of profitable companies. Why might this behavior characterize a successful organization?