

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

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The question that is controversial both the theorists and the pragmatists is an old one: is the conflict something we should avoid, prevent, fix or reduce (the negative school)?

On the contrary the conflict is necessary, inevitable, even a resource for organisations and even human being in their private dynamics?

The two philosophies of course have their supporters, both in term of theories and techniques, “their books”.

The question here will be answered differently, starting from the assumption that there are sane conflict and pathological conflicts.

It is indispensable a definition of the two terms, first.

Roughly, it could be said that a sane conflict is a phenomenon that you can afford to ignore, live with, or even welcome.

A pathological conflict is instead a human dynamics where the person involved, but mostly the leader responsible of the environment where the conflict arises cannot ignore it and that he inevitable has to tackle.

Accepting this partition, now the problems are two:

- 1) how can we distinguish a sane conflict from a pathological one?
- 2) In case we found a pathological conflict, are there strategies, remedies to solve it or at least reduce at the least possible level?

We need a diagnosis first and second, if it exists, a “therapy”.

It will not be explained explicitly how to diagnose a sane conflict , which should be interpreted in a subjective way once a pathological conflict is clearly individuated.

THE 7 CLUES DIAGNOSTIC METHODS

We can individuate a pathological conflict when the following indicators appears.

a) The double level



A double level is a necessary but non sufficient condition for the existence of a pathological conflict.

A double level is a form of communication which implies two simultaneous level. The first level is called Social Level (SL), to mean that it is evident “socially”, every person attending to this dynamics receive this first level and generally it share the same perception of the other attendees.

The second level is called Psychological level (PL). It is not so evident as SO, as SO is so strong and bright to obscure it. Besides, to be perceived, this level needs an interpretation and the availability of previous information and the forecast of successive events.

Being so subjective and competing with the objectivity of SL, PL can easily be denied. But, the real meaning of the whole transaction is carried by the Psychological level.

An example is when people summon a meeting to deal with an important organisational problem but this is an arena for power manoeuvres, although they remain hidden and always justified or masked in term of “real problems”, the Social Level.

It easily understandable how the players of such a double level have a double roles on the two levels.

Some organisational cultures are more or less inclined t o double level communication, which per se is not (yet) a serious reason to diagnose a pathological conflict.

b) incongruence

This clue is a marker that indicates when the pathological conflict starts. It is a temporary clued, it will fade away but it could reappear.

It is possible to recover this factor if not visible any longer through a careful investigation with people involved in the conflict.

Incongruence is the presence of contradictory messages.

One kind of contradiction is when the body languages (behaviour) denies the verbal language (oral or written)

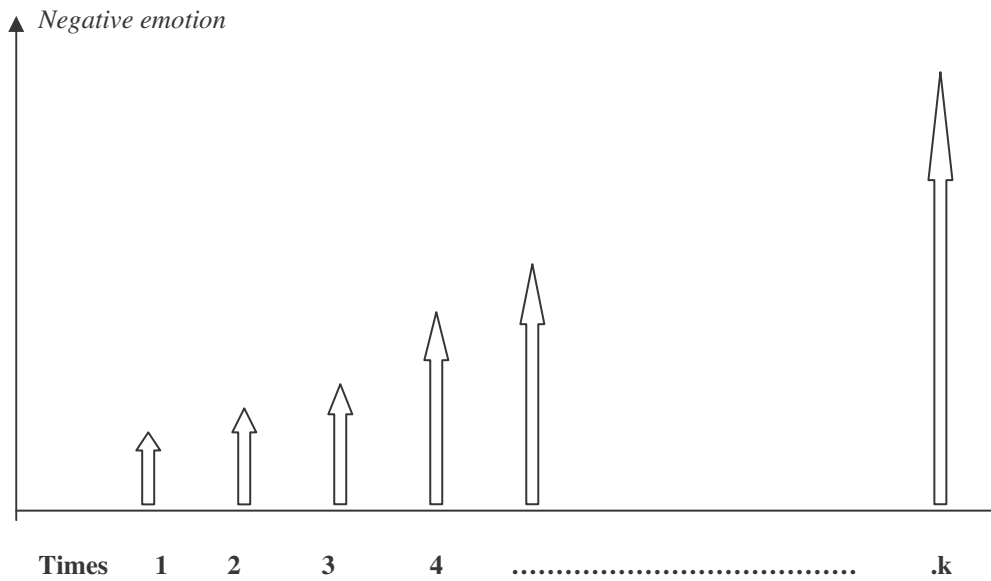
For example, people showing satisfaction when the events are negative or dissatisfaction when they are positive are a classic form of incongruence

Repetition

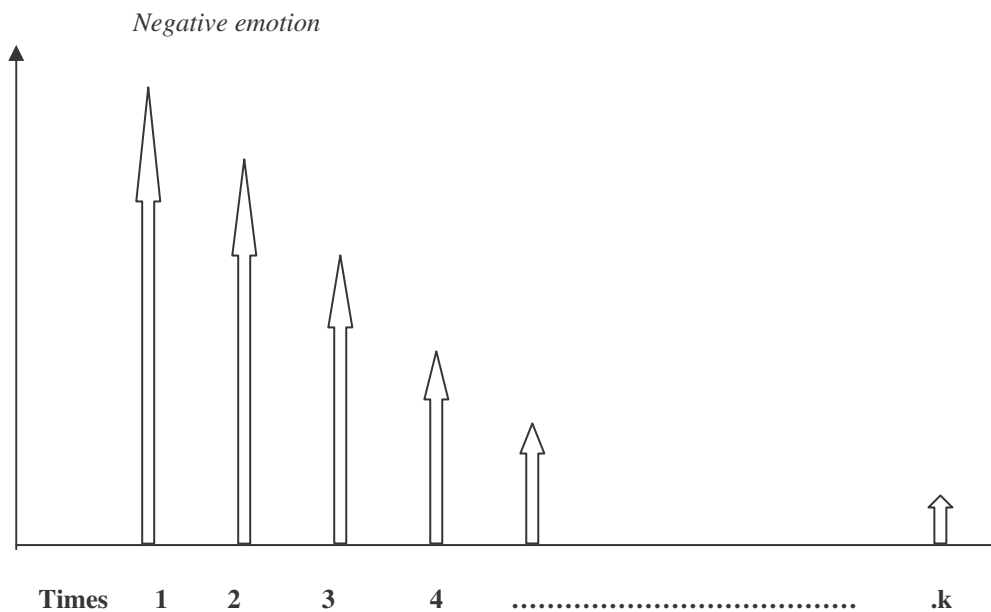
The first time an interpersonal clash happens, whether between two individual or several people, it is not a pathological conflict.

If a similar process recurs, more and more, this is a sign of repletion, a further clue of pathology.

The repetition is associated with the increase of an unpleasant emotion. If the emotion is negative but attenuating from time to time, it is not the kind of repetition we mention here.



This is not the repletion as intended here:



The number of repetitions is "k", the last "time" of the pathological conflict

The conduct is then not to dramatise or intervene the first time of occurrence of a conflict, which could never re-appear or exponentially smooth.

A low “k” is generally preferable than a high “k”, if we are in presence of the growing effect.

Sometimes the pathological conflict is inevitable but we still can choose between low and high “k”.

c) Triangle

It is the indirect communication which conveys a message not directly to the addressed person but through an intermediate one, the angle of the triangle.

The triangle can be extended to an unlimited chain of “angles” which shift the message from the originator to the target. The process induces an amplification and distortion, reducing the social responsibility of the initial sender.

d) Accomplices

The participants to the pathological conflict are contributing in a determinant way to carry on the process, as if there were a “shared plan” (partially unconscious). It is not possible to define a partition between the “good player and the bad player”, as every person is an “accomplice”. Besides, the roles are variable and who we generally call the victim has on the contrary an important role and the power to change the scene, where it will play a different role.

e) Audience

It is the non necessary presence of people. For example, to summon a meeting with people that are non relevant for a discussion involving a restricted group of persons.

The audience constitutes the energy of the pathological conflict, which will be discharged at the end of the conflict (the phase “k” of point c). A big audience (in terms of quantity but also quality of the attendees) creates a higher seriousness of the conflict.

If one person is an audience and leaves the scene, he reduces the importance of the conflict.

The audience is a temporary role, quickly it becomes an “accomplice” and then he cannot leave the conflict till its end.

f) The end of the conflict

The duration of a pathological conflict can vary, it can last also years.

The final act of the conflict is associated to a damage of economic nature. What characterises a pathological conflict is that there are only losers.

If at least one winner exists, the whole process is called “manoeuvre”, which is less dangerous than a pathological conflict.

It happens as if there is a sort of plan to end in this non rational way a negative process

Why pathological conflicts?

Although illogical, there are some explanations of the diffusion of pathological conflict within organisations.

Conflicts are generally associated to a high level of stability of the groups (whole companies). They act as a sort of gravity centre, as they make memorable the events of the group and creates chances for intense participation.

The solution of a pathological conflict

The first possibility is to avoid to enter the pathological conflict.

If requested to be an angle of the triangle, it is possible not to continue the chain. Somebody else will be used for the same function but not who interrupt the triangle chain.

A second possibility when one is invited to be the audience, with the inevitable destiny to become an accomplices.

The solution of a pathological conflict when one is involved or a pathological conflict prevention is achieved through an **“act of intimacy”**

An act of intimacy is here intended an action on the clue a) (double level)

It consists in removing the social level , making accessible the psychological level.

This act is not a strategy, it is not considering the risks or the opportunity which it implies, it is an act with no other meaning than the act itself, a form of gratuity.

The consequence are unpredictable, it could be positive or negative for the person which acts intimately, but the pathological conflict, as far as that person is concerned, it is interrupted.

It is also a powerful way to speed up people dynamics, saving a consistent amount of time and an anti-stress factor. A good level of intimacy in group makes their members able to endure stressful situations for others. The risk of intimacy is high on the short term but resulting favourable for the person and his environment of the longer term.