

## Lesson 4

# Resolving Family Conflicts

Conflict—you'll find it everywhere from the corporate world to the garden club. Whenever two people come into contact, the potential for conflict arises. It is a normal part of human interaction.

### This lesson will help you:

- Understand the nature of conflict;
- Identify your style of dealing with conflict; and
- Learn about a process that can help you effectively resolve conflicts with others.

To prepare for this lesson, take a few minutes and:

- Jot down **words** that come to mind when you think about conflict; and

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- Identify the **feelings** you can recall about conflict situations you have experienced.

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### A Closer Look at Conflict

Simply defined, **conflict is a struggle over values and claims to scarce status, power, or resources.** Conflict arises when two people have different values or needs and it appears that satisfying one person's needs will thwart the needs of the other (example: Do you use this money on a new car or household improvements?). Money may be the scarce resource behind this dilemma, but differing values may be at the source of the conflict.

Take a look at the words that came to mind when you thought about the word "conflict." Were most of them negative?

A common belief about conflict is that it should be avoided. It is uncomfortable. Have you ever considered that conflicts can have some positive benefits?

### The Benefits of Conflict

Conflicts are a fact of life to be dealt with, not a sign of failure. They can provide an opportunity for new learning and an improved relationship. Here are some ways conflict can have positive effects:

- Confrontation in a conflict can lead to change;
- Being aware of conflicts can increase your motivation to do well;
- Conflicts increase awareness of problems that need to be solved;
- Conflicts make life more interesting;
- Disagreement often causes a decision to be thought through more carefully;

- Conflicts help you understand what you are like under pressure;
- Minor conflicts can defuse potentially large ones; and
- Conflicts can be fun if they're not taken too seriously.

While it is not suggested that you go out and look for conflicts, it is important to note that a conflict can provide you with some new directions and opportunities. The question is, can you capitalize on the positives and make conflict work for you?

### Yours, Mine, and Ours

The matter of who owns what can be a major source of conflict in families. There are three categories to examine:

- **Possessions**—This category refers to material objects around the home. Possessions are either shared or individually owned.
- **Territory**—This refers to space and goes beyond the strictly material aspect of possessions. It can refer to land as well as to living and work space. Territory can be owned by individuals, shared with the group, or owned by the public at large.
- **Time**—This is one resource that everyone has the same amount of. People choose to apportion time among work, leisure, and other pursuits.

The above resources can be owned in three ways:

- Yours (unavailable to me);
- Mine (exclusively); and
- Ours (shared).

Making assumptions about ownership without discussion can lead to major battles. Families may find the following exercise helpful in establishing what the rules are, who owns what, what can be borrowed, and what people would rather not share. A frank discussion among all the family might hold a few surprises.

### Yours, Mine, and Ours Activity

This activity is designed to be used with all family members. Each person should complete the follow-

ing form individually. Then get together and discuss the responses.

### Ownership

Resources	Yours	Mine	Ours
Possessions			
Territory			
Time			

In discussion, pay particular attention to what the others have written in their Mine column.

Here's how one family member completed this form:

### Ownership

Resources	Yours	Mine	Ours
Possessions	Camera Power tools	Sewing machine	Lawn mower
Territory	Tool Bench	Sewing Room	Living Room
Time	Workday	Workday	Evening Mealtime

### Differing Values-A Major Source of Conflict

When two people have different values and beliefs, they may choose different goals or different methods to achieve the same goals. Since each goal requires an investment of **time**, **effort**, and some **sacrifice**, one goal cannot be pursued without sacrificing the other to some extent. When one person perceives a block to achieving his or her goal, conflict occurs.

Recognizing differences in values can bring about an understanding of why certain areas or issues create conflict. The following exercise is designed to help you and your family understand each other a bit better. It is not designed to have you clarify these further for goal-setting purposes, but rather to explore more deeply the values each of you holds. This exercise will be most effective if all family members can complete it individually, then share as a group.

## Values and Goals Activity

Rate the following 15 goals according to their importance to you. Check in Column A the five you consider most important, in Column B the five next important, and in Column C the five you consider least important.

Goals	A	B	C
1. To live here because it is a satisfying way of life for our family.			
2. To have freedom and independence in work and other activities.			
3. To have economic security.			
4. To have all of the comforts and conveniences of life.			
5. To improve career opportunities before we improve our home.			
6. To have what is needed for our home, even if it means using credit.			
7. To have good health.			
8. To provide good educational opportunities for our children.			
9. To have friends and enjoy good times with them.			
10. To have and enjoy a pleasant home life.			
11. To do things that are new and exciting.			
12. To engage in self-improvement and intellectual activities.			
13. To pursue a favorite hobby or sport such as bicycling, fishing, collecting, etc.			
14. To be influential in guiding policies and activities in our community or the country for worthwhile causes.			
15. To engage in religious activities.			

After you have each rated these goals, take some time to explore your similarities and differences. How might the differences contribute to creating conflicts in your family? What similar goals can help you find agreement in some areas?

## Conflict Issues in Families

In the preceding material we have noted some of the basic issues that are sources of conflict in all types of families; that is, differences in values and goals and the ownership of resources such as possessions, territory, and time.

To begin focusing on conflict issues in two-generation families in business, think for a moment about the two-generation families that you know. If you are one of these families, consider your own situation. What issues seem to create the most conflict? Why?

- Authority, control, or power**—Probably the most potential for conflict arises with the issue of power. Who has the ultimate power? The struggle for power can affect virtually every situation in a family business. This may manifest itself in many ways. For example, in a two-generation business, the older generation may wish to maintain the reins of power and refuse to relinquish any authority to the younger generation. Families generally prize the value of independence and freedom to operate their own enterprise, yet many times the children are controlled well into adulthood (and even middle age) by the parents. The extent of conflicts spawned by such power struggles can only be imagined.
- Legal transfer of property**—Transfer of property from one generation to the next is another issue that can create tension and conflict in two-generation families. Some members may feel that legal agreements are all that are needed to feel that more communication, mutual understanding, tolerance, and acceptance are needed to fully deal with the issue.
- Division of income**—The question of when to decide that the younger generation gets a more equitable, equal, or greater share of the income is another potential issue.

- **Obligations and indebtedness**—A related issue is, “Who bears the brunt of risks in the business? How is risk handled? Does someone in the situation feel taken advantage of?”
- **In-law relations and conflict of loyalties**—Couples have additional opportunities for conflicts related to these family relationships. Closeness in living and working can add to normal stresses that might exist in these areas. On a positive note, there are also increased chances for support, which can be especially helpful in times of stress and uncertainty.
- **Differences between methods of coping**—One generation may react to economic situations more conservatively, while the other may be willing to take more risks.
- **Decision making**—The need for crucial decisions to be made frequently, often with little time to gather all the facts, contributes to conflicts. Who makes decisions? Is someone blamed if decisions turn out to be poor ones?

These are just seven issues that create conflict in two-generation families in business together. Did your responses to the question above touch on any of these issues?

## Managing Conflict

Now that you know a little more about the nature of conflict, let’s consider how to manage it effectively. To begin, it is important to examine the different ways individuals behave in attempting to resolve conflicts.

Experience in relating with others shows that everyone reacts just a little differently when conflicts arise. That is what makes life interesting. What is your style of resolving conflict?

Here’s an activity to help you identify your style:

### What’s Your Style? Activity

#### Directions

Place a check beside the group of characteristics that best describes you. Do this activity individually. It

need not be shared with others. Be honest with yourself. Check only one category.

- A. Do you:
  - Try to overpower opponents by forcing them to accept your solution to the conflict?
  - Consider your goals of high importance, while the relationship is of minor importance?
  - Seek to achieve goals at all costs?
  - Assume conflicts are settled by one person winning and one person losing?
  - Attempt to win by overpowering or intimidating others?
- B. Do you:
  - Feel somewhat concerned with your own goals and your relationships with others?
  - Seek a compromise?
  - Give up part of your goals and persuade the other person to give up part of his/her goals?
  - Sacrifice part of your goal in order to find agreement for the common good?
- C. Do you:
  - Feel the relationship is of great importance, while your own goals are of little importance?
  - Want to be accepted and liked by others?
  - Think that conflict should be avoided in favor of harmony?
  - Believe that conflicts cannot be discussed without damaging relationships?
  - Give up your goals to preserve the relationship?
- D. Do you:
  - Withdraw into a shell to avoid conflicts?
  - Give up personal goals and relationships to avoid conflicts?
  - Avoid conflict issues and people you are in conflict with.
  - Feel it is hopeless to try to resolve conflicts?
  - Believe it is easier to withdraw (physically and psychologically) from a conflict than to face it?
- E. Do you:
  - Highly value your own goals and relationships?
  - Seek a solution that achieves both your goals and the goals of the other person?
  - See conflict as improving relationships by reducing tension between two people?

If you chose A, your style could be characterized as a “**shark**.” Sharks tend to use force, causing the other side to give in. This creates a winner and a loser. The shark has a deep personal interest in the outcome of the conflict, but does not care much about the needs of others involved.

If you chose B, your style could be characterized as a “**fox**.” Foxes use compromise, or bargaining behavior in which each side obtains part of what it wants. An attempt is made to find an answer in which gains and losses of both parties are equal. This style leaves interests and needs of each person only partially satisfied.

If you chose C, your style could be characterized as a “**teddy bear**.” Teddy bears tend to smooth things over and fail to confront areas of conflict. This person probably does not have as much personal interest or stake in the conflict, but does care about the needs of others.

If you chose D, your style could be characterized as a “**turtle**.” Turtles withdraw to avoid the conflict situation entirely. Little attempt is made to satisfy either their personal needs or the needs of others.

If you chose E, your style could be characterized as an “**owl**.” Wise owls use problem-solving behavior in which both sides meet their needs at a level sufficient to avoid feelings of losing. Everyone wins; conflict is reduced or eliminated. This style requires the full understanding of all viewpoints.

Most people have a few characteristics of more than one style and may even behave differently depending on the person with whom they may be in conflict. Generally, however one category emerges.

Many people, wanting a more effective style, work toward the owl or problem-solving approach. With this approach, parties in the conflict **collaborate** in solving the conflict. **Collaboration promotes an understanding of everyone’s perspective; increases communication, cooperation, and interdependence; and instills a feeling of integrity, trust, and mutual support.**

## A Step-By-Step Way To Resolve Conflict

Here is a step-by-step strategy for resolving conflict that uses collaboration.

1. **State the problem**—Ask yourself, “What is the problem?” Be as specific as possible, giving attention to as many facets of the problem as possible. One author said, “A problem well-defined is half solved.” It may also help to separate this problem from your feelings about it. The problem may be the feelings associated with a particular issue, rather than the issue itself. It is also important to avoid offering solutions. Suggesting solutions at this point can cause you to avoid stating what is really bothering you. Other questions you might ask yourself as you define the problem are:

- Am I stating the real problem?
- How do I know it is a problem?
- Is the situation a problem or is it my reaction to the situation that makes it a problem?
- Is there more than one problem?
- Why is it a problem?
- If nothing is done, what will happen? (Is there really a problem?)

2. **Who is involved**—Who is part of the problem and, perhaps, the solution? Who is affected by the problem? List everyone involved and then identify the main characters.

3. **Examine your values related to the problem**—What are some of your needs and concerns related to the issue at hand? Why are they important to you? Which are the most important? This step helps to clarify the problem. It also brings out differences and similarities of interests between the persons involved.

4. **Brainstorm solutions**—Gather as many solutions to the problem as the group can generate. It helps to list them on a large piece of paper. It is important not to judge any potential solutions. Accept all ideas from everyone as worthy of consideration regardless of how ridiculous they may seem.

5. **Rank the solutions**—Using the values identified in Step 3, everyone should rank the various solutions. Those involved should then be able to identify those potential solutions that would be accept-

able to all individuals concerned. New solutions may be identified by combining already proposed ideas.

**6. Through consensus, identify a solution**—Everyone should agree on the potential solution. Avoid voting because this sets up a win-lose situation. If agreement on a solution cannot be reached, go back to Step 4 or wait awhile and let feelings settle down before proceeding again. Most problems don't need to be solved immediately.

**7. Troubleshoot the decision**—Ask questions like, "Why won't this idea work? What are some of the obstacles? What could go wrong?" Try to satisfy yourself that in spite of these obstacles, the solution chosen has a reasonable chance of solving the conflict.

Implement your solution to the conflict. It is helpful to think of all solutions as temporary. Be open to going through the process again if it seems that the solution is not working like you thought it would.

### Put the Process into Action

Like any new skill, **learning collaboration takes practice**. As a family, choose a minor area of conflict to practice the seven steps. Here are some additional suggestions to increase your chances of success.

- As a family, agree that now is a good time to attempt to resolve the conflict. Use "prime time" when energy is high and motivation is positive. Avoid attempts to resolve conflicts when one member is angry or tired.
- Stay in the present. Do not engage in coercion or fault-finding from the past.
- There must be an underlying attitude of respect, caring, forgiveness, and goodwill.
- Provide "face-saving" mechanisms. Don't corner the other person. Allow a "time out" if emotion gets too high. Set a time to resume again.

### A conflict has been helpful if:

- You are able to work better with others after the conflict;
- You and the others involved feel better about each other after the conflict;
- You and the others are satisfied with the results of the conflict;
- Your ability to resolve future conflicts with others has been enhanced;
- You know more about the issue under discussion; and
- You feel your point of view has been heard.

### A Final Word

This process has been discussed as a way for many families to approach conflict creatively. It does not offer specific answers but rather has **suggested a process** by which families can work through their conflicts. Understanding more about family stress and ways families can cope with it is the focus of Lesson 5.

### Additional Reading

*Alive and Aware: How to Improve Your Relationships Through Better Communication* by S. Miller, E. Nunnally and D. Wackman, Minneapolis, Minn.: Interpersonal Communication, Inc., 1975.

*The Art of Problem Solving* by R. Carkhuff, Amherst, Mass.: Human Resource Development Press, 1973.

*Bradshaw on the Family: A Revolutionary Way of Self-Discovery* by J. Bradshaw, Deerfield Beach, Florida: Health Communications, Inc., 1988.

*Transitions* by W. Bridges, Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1988.

## Study Questions

### Lesson 4

#### Resolving Family Conflicts

1. Some people feel that compromise is an effective method for dealing with conflict.

Why is collaboration a more effective method?

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2. A friend has recently mentioned to you that he tries to avoid conflict at all times.

What might you say to him about conflict?

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3. What is at the root of all conflict?

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4. What one issue is a major source of conflict in two-generation families in business together?

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5. Stating the problem (Step 1 in the conflict resolution process) is crucial to the success of the process.

What are some questions you can ask to help clarify the problem?

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## Study Answers

### Lesson 4

#### Resolving Family Conflicts

1. Although compromise can be useful, it can also build frustration and mistrust. Parties involved may become frustrated when their needs are only partially met. **With collaboration, openness and honesty are encouraged.** Because this approach seeks to meet everyone's needs, information is shared freely and without suspicion. Power is shared equally.
2. Although we think of conflict as negative, there can be some positive aspects of conflict. For example, conflict can lead to change and motivate you to do your best. It can also cause a decision to be thought out more carefully. Life could be pretty boring without some conflict.
3. Conflict between people develops when there is a struggle over values and claims to scarce status, power, or resources. When two people have different values or goals and it is perceived that satisfying one person's needs will directly thwart the other person from meeting his or her needs, conflict develops.
4. The issue of power or authority has the most potential for conflict in the two-generation family. Who has control? This struggle for power can affect virtually every decision related to the family business.
5. What will happen if I don't deal with this? Is the situation a problem, or is it my reaction to the situation? How do I know it's a problem? Why is it a problem?



## References

*The Two Generation Farm Family* by N. Vester,  
Alberta, Canada: Rural Development Studies, October 1981.

“Interaction in Farm Families: Tensions and Stress”  
by P. Rosenblatt and R. Anderson in *The Family in Rural Society*, Coward and Smith (ed.) Boulder Colo.: Westview Press, 1981.

“Creative Conflict Resolution” by D. Cushman in  
*Forum Magazine*, New York, N.Y.: J.C. Penney Co., 1983.

*Managing Conflict Successfully* by H. Lingren, Lincoln, Neb.: Cooperative Extension Service, Nebguide HEG 83-181, September 1983.

# NOTES

This lesson was revised by Brenda J. Thames, EdD, Program Development Specialist, and Deborah J. Thomason, EdD, Family and Youth Development Specialist, Department of Family and Youth Development. These materials were originally adapted by Lucy J. Pearson from the “Stress on the Farm Home Study Course” prepared by Jeanne Trachta, Randy Weigel, and Barb Abbott, Cooperative Extension Service, Iowa State University of Science and Technology.