

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT – MORE ABOUT THE COURSE

One of the focus areas of the **Primer on managing conflict** course (see accompanying brochure) is conflict-type analysis, which draws on the insights of renowned mediator, Christopher W. Moore, and first laid out in his book *The Mediation Process*.¹ Moore categorised conflict into five types, in the form of a ‘Conflict Circle’, based on the prominence of their underlying causes:

- interest conflict
- structural conflict
- relationship conflict
- information (data) conflict
- values-based conflict

A key benefit of conflict-type analysis, either for conflict participants or intervenors (like mediators), is that it facilitates the appropriate matching of conflict resolution strategies to underlying conflict causes or types. An added benefit is that it enables conflict resolvers, particularly when faced with complex conflicts, to prioritise and implement conflict interventions ‘one conflict-type at a time’, thus allowing for an orderly and systematic approach to complex conflict resolution.

Participants in the course are familiarised with the different types of conflict, the means for identifying them, and the intervention strategies appropriate to each type of conflict. The course highlights the fact that this model is an ‘ideal-type’, and that conflict is, in reality, often an expression of more than one cause, or (less often) an expression of causes that cannot be neatly slotted into any conflict-type model.

The following is an extract from the manual accompanying the course, explaining how to identify one of the conflict types, namely, information (data) conflict. The explanation follows a practical exercise given to participants.

¹ Christopher W. Moore, *The Mediation Process: Practical Strategies for Resolving Conflict*, 3rd edition (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass 2003) 599 pp

Information (or ‘data’) conflicts are typically caused by one or more of the following –

- ***lack of information, or insufficient information:*** A common cause of information conflict is the omission of necessary information. ‘Necessary’ information, in this context, means information that would either have pre-empted (avoided) the conflict in question, or materially modified the way it expressed and evolved. A recent example is the information made available by the scientific and medical establishment during the early stages of the Covid 19 pandemic. Conflicting information and insufficient data regarding the transmission, severity, and appropriate mitigation measures led to widespread confusion, disagreement and conflict among policymakers, healthcare professionals and the general public.
- ***different interpretations of the same information:*** Different interpretations of the same information or data are another, often unnecessary, source of prolonged, and sometimes even intense, conflict. Consider the topical debate and contestation over climate-change. Climate reports indicate a gradual increase in global temperatures over the past century, along with projections of still higher temperatures. Many, including scientists and environmental activists, interpret the data as clear evidence of human-induced climate change, emphasising the need for urgent action to reduce carbon emissions and mitigate its effects. They argue for policies such as transitioning to renewable energy sources and implementing carbon pricing mechanisms. Others, including some scientists and ‘climate-change sceptics’ interpret the data differently. They acknowledge the warming trend but attribute it to natural climate variability rather than human activity. They argue against aggressive measures to reduce emissions, citing uncertainties in climate models and potential economic costs. These conflicting interpretations of the same scientific data lead to polarised viewpoints and policy disagreements.

By contrast, let’s consider the following instance of conflict, involving a couple doing household budgeting: One partner may understand a certain portion of the family budget to be *discretionary* income, available for leisure activities or luxury purchases, while the other may view the same portion of income as *essential income*, being necessary for long-term goals, such as education or retirement. What might appear to be *different interpretations of information* (what is discretionary income and what is essential income) is actually an expression of *different priorities / interests*. The couple do not have different *interpretations or understandings* of what the terms ‘discretionary; and ‘essential’ mean, but rather *different views on what expenditure should be considered discretionary or essential*. The difference is more one about *priorities / interests*, than one about different interpretations. This illustrates the importance for conflict resolution interventions of always looking beyond appearances to discover the actual or underlying cause or type of conflict.

- ***disagreements on the relevance or reliability of available information:*** Consider the following example. In a political, or socio-economic disagreement, one party might understand a policy to have achieved success based on statistics showing a decrease in unemployment rates; the other party, accepting the statistics showing a decrease in unemployment rates, might view the policy as having been more of a failure than a success on account of the policy having produced wider income inequality or more stagnant wage growth. Such differing interpretations of the *relevance* of the same information can lead to heated debates, fueling political polarization and hindering consensus-building.

Another example: in the course of wage negotiations, management proposes a certain wage increase based on the official inflation rate. However, the trade union dismisses the argument, contending that the official rate fails to accurately capture the inflation actually experienced by its members. The union argues that the official inflation rate is based on a ‘basket’ that overlooks the more prominent cost drivers affecting their demographic, such as housing, healthcare, or education expenses (which have shown higher increases). In both examples there are differing views on the *relevance* of the information.

The disagreements in both instances would have been about the *reliability* of the information if either one of the parties had questioned the soundness of the methodology employed in generating the actual statistics (showing a decrease in unemployment or a particular increase in the official inflation rate).