

Levels of Conflict: Speed B. Leas' Model

Managing Conflict Based on Level of Seriousness

Conflict resolution expert Speed B. Leas created the following framework for project managers to judge the seriousness of a conflict and better understand how conflicts may escalate. Understanding this model can help you look at a situation more objectively, moving past your own judgments to see what is happening. You can then better determine what tools and techniques may work in a given situation.

Level	Name	Characteristic	Language	Atmosphere/Environment
Level 1	Problem to Solve	Information sharing and collaboration	Open and fact-based	People have different opinions or misunderstandings, or there are conflicting goals or values. The atmosphere isn't comfortable, but it isn't emotionally charged either.
Level 2	Disagreement	Personal protection trumps resolving the conflict	Guarded and open to interpretation	Self-protection becomes important. Team members distance themselves from the debate. Discussions happen off-line (outside of the team environment). Good-natured joking moves to half-joking barbs.
Level 3	Contest	Winning trumps resolving the conflict	Includes personal attacks	The aim is to win. People take sides. Blaming flourishes.
Level 4	Crusade	Protecting one's own group becomes the focus	Ideological	Resolving the situation is not good enough. Team members believe that people "on the other side" will not change and need to be removed.
Level 5	World War	Destroy the other!	Little or nonexistent	"Destroy!" is the battle cry. The combatants must be separated. No constructive outcome can be had.

Assessing the Situation

According to Leas' model, when a team is in conflict, you should take some time to observe the situation and make sure you are seeing both sides of the dispute. First, listen to complaints without trying to solve them. Feel the energy of the group and assess the level of conflict. Look for glances, eye rolling, and words that halt conversation, to ascertain if the conflict is out in the open or if it is playing out below the surface. Focus on the language being used. Compare it to Leas' five levels. Take a look at the table again. What sort of language would you expect to hear in a Level 2 conflict? How about a Level 5 conflict?

Level 2 might sound something like this:

I know you think my idea won't work as well, but we tried your approach last time, and there were a lot of problems.

Level 5 would be much more combative:

It's us or them. We have to beat them!

After observing and diagnosing the level of conflict, you can decide what to do about it. If the conflict is at Levels 1 through 3, do not take any immediate action to resolve it. Instead, first give the team a chance to fix it themselves. If the team can overcome the conflict on their own, they will have developed and exercised their own skills for resolving conflicts. It is okay for them to have some discomfort during this process because that will better equip them to manage similar conflicts in the future. However, if the situation doesn't improve and instead seems to be escalating, the following guidelines can be useful in resolving the conflict:

Level 1 (Problem to Solve): Try constructing a collaborative scenario to illustrate the competing issues and use that scenario to help build consensus around a decision that everyone can support.

Level 2 (Disagreement): Conflict resolution typically involves empowering the relevant team members to solve the problem. This approach builds the team members' support for the decision and restores a sense of safety to the group.

Level 3 (Contest): The conflict has become accusatory. To help fix the issue, we need to accommodate people's differing views. Although this may involve compromising on the work to be done, we should not compromise the team's values.

Level 4 (Crusade): Resolving this level of conflict requires diplomacy. Since the communications between opposing sides have largely broken down, the team may need a facilitator to convey messages between the different parties. Our focus should be on de-escalating the conflict to take it down a level or two.

Level 5 (World War): Conflict at this level may be unresolvable. Instead of trying to fix it, we may need to figure out how we can give people ways to live with it. At this level we might separate the opposing individuals to prevent further harm to each other.

Remember, conflict is normal and inevitable when people work closely together. Project managers often feel obliged to help resolve a conflict. However, before rushing in, it is best to observe the situation to get a better view of the issues. Leas' model can help us objectively assess the severity of a conflict. Pay attention to the language being used and give the team an opportunity to resolve the conflict themselves. If you do need to intervene, focus on de-escalating the problem by separating facts from emotions and look for ways to help people move forward despite their differences.

Exercise

Review the following snippets of conversation, then write in your Exercise Notebook the conflict level illustrated in each.

Snippet
1. "They have no idea, yet again. We would be better off without them!"
2. "Okay, I get that you will have extra work if we choose this option. But so will I if we go with your method. And I'll have to redo this piece each time we set up a new page."
3. "That's it! I warned you before. You and me—outside, right now!"
4. "I know you have told me before, but I must be losing it. How do I request a ticket again?"
5. "You're just pushing for this option because it makes your job easier. You never care about how it impacts anyone else! I'm tired of it. I think we should try something else for once."

Answer

Conflict Level	
1. Level 4	2. Level 2
3. Level 5	4. Level 1
5. Level 3	