

Sample Lesson: Recognizing Conflict

This sample lesson gives you an idea of the kind of learning you can expect from the Personal Skills Development Course. The instructor's answers are in blue. The student's answers are in red. Lesson: Recognizing conflict

Scenario:

Conflict has developed between two co-workers Michelle and Rae. Michelle is Rae's senior by 10 years. She finds that Rae agrees with everything she says. Rae accepts all of Michelle's ideas without question and without offering any of his own opinions or ideas.

Michelle does not think of this situation as one of "conflict" between Rae and her. In fact, she hasn't thought much about it at all. To the extent that she has, she thinks Rae is a "Yes" man who isn't very bright and who never has an original thought of his own. When she deals with Rae, Michelle feels irritation and impatience.

Rae may be aware of times when he disagrees with Michelle or when he has contrary ideas or opinions. At some level, he may be aware that he always defers to her. He may think that by deferring to Michelle he is being respectful and supportive – a good and helpful colleague. Rae probably has anxieties and insecurities about expressing his own contrary opinions and ideas, but he may be largely unaware of these emotions.

Learning Point:

An unsatisfactory or unproductive human relationship is a conflicted relationship. The parties may be partly or even wholly unaware of the conflict in their relationship. In many ways, the more unaware they are of their conflict, the more powerful will be its adverse influence on them and their interaction.

We can significantly improve our ability to deal productively with another person by recognizing the conflict in our unsatisfactory relationships and becoming aware of the part our own perceptions, assumptions, emotions and behaviours play in the situation.

Learning:

1. Is this a conflict? Why do you think it is a conflict?

Yes this is a conflict because it is hampering the productivity of Michelle and Rae as a team. Even though it is not an open conflict there is friction because Michelle is irritated by Rae always agreeing with her. It is hard to believe that Rae and Michelle would always agree about everything they discuss. It seems that Rae is so insecure that he prefers to go against himself rather than face Michelle.

Here is my answer:

Yes, this is indeed a conflict. It is what I would call a "latent conflict". That is, the conflict is unstated and is, for the most part, hidden from a third-party observer. Although the conflict is latent or hidden, it is one that is experienced to some extent by both parties, Michelle and Rae. They both have some awareness of the difficulty or lock between them and both experience some degree of negative or "conflict" emotion in their dealings with

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each other. Certainly Michelle's awareness of the conflict and the emotion she actually feels may be greater than Rae's, but they both have some experience of this latent or underlying conflict.

2. So what is Michelle actually thinking and feeling when she interacts with Rae? Imagine you are Michelle. What would you actually be *thinking* and *feeling* in your dealings with Rae?

I would be impatient, thinking I am wasting my time talking with Rae and trying to include him in any decision-making. I would think, "Here we go again – I'm not going to get anything useful out of him unless I dig, dig, dig and I have to be very careful about what I say and how I say it or I will hurt his feelings. He has a fragile ego. I really wish Rae would grow a backbone."

When I put myself in Michelle's shoes, here is **my answer**:

In that situation, I wouldn't be thinking or feeling that much at first. It would take me some time before I even noticed that Rae always defers to my opinions and suggestions. But once that became apparent, it would bug me. It would bug me that he always puts the burden on me to decide where the conversation should go and to do the thinking. I am pretty comfortable thinking for myself and speaking my mind, regardless of what others think or say, so it does not upset me a lot when a person like Rae doesn't "pull their weight". I would be aware of it, mildly irritated, but I would probably think it's not worth the hassle to raise the issue with Rae.

3. It is likely that my answer to that question was different from yours. It should be because of our different personalities, psychological and emotional make-up and different ways of relating to the world and all the people and situations we are faced with.

I have already stated that if I were Michelle I probably wouldn't say or do much. I might say nothing at all. If you were in Michelle's situation, what would you *say* or *do*?

Depending on the situation, I might challenge Rae for his opinions and would ask him directly what he thinks. If he just regurgitated my words back at me I would then probably ignore him and treat him as if he wasn't participating in the conversation – because he isn't. I would probably not pay any more attention to him.

4. Let's assume that Michelle does not say anything to Rae –she does not express the dissatisfaction and frustration that she feels because Rae always agrees with her. Why is that? Why does Michelle act as she does toward Rae? What causes her to behave that way?

Michelle may feel that she already has to cope with Rae's lack of assertiveness and just doesn't want to take it any further. After all, she is not responsible for improving Rae's

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ability to interact with people and if she pursues it, he may take up even more of her time than he does now as she teaches him how to stand up for his own ideas.

In any situation, conflict and the negative emotions associated with it will always affect our thought process in that situation. This is especially true of conflict emotions that are largely outside our awareness. In this case, Michelle experiences mild irritation and frustration dealing with Rae. She doesn't even think of herself as being "in conflict" with Rae – but, she is. This underlying conflict between Michelle and Rae, this "latent" conflict, exerts a very significant influence on each of them and their relationship.

This influence is even more powerful because, to a large extent, it is outside of their awareness. In particular, this unconscious conflict clouds Michelle's perceptions and opinion of Rae, causing her to discount and devalue him, giving her a narrow, negative view of him and of their relationship. For the most part, she has written him off. Furthermore, Michelle has no awareness of her own contribution to this unsatisfactory and unproductive relationship.

5. What would you say is Michelle's contribution to the unsatisfactory and unproductive relationship between Rae and her?

Michelle may be a little too forceful in her approach to Rae – telling not asking. Maybe she has "poohed poohed" Rae's ideas in the past. Maybe Rae has observed what happens to other people who disagree with Michelle.

Here is **my answer**:

In "writing him off", Michelle assumes, without really thinking about it, that Rae has nothing useful to say. She thinks he is dull and weak-minded. But that isn't true. Her assumption is false. The truth as we know it (as independent observers) is that Rae is afraid to speak his mind for fear of rocking the boat, of making trouble with Michelle. Furthermore, when Michelle has such negative thoughts of Rae, when she forms that negative attitude and writes him off, it inevitably affects her behaviour towards him. Her negativity is transmitted to Rae, however subtle and unintentional.

Let's take our analysis one step further. Writing Rae off may be Michelle's unconscious strategy to avoid having to deal with the conflict between them. In effect, she blames it all on him and chooses to do nothing. This is not to say that Rae is blameless. He is contributing very much to their unsatisfactory and unproductive relationship. He and Michelle are both responsible for the problem and both are responsible to resolve it.

Hampering Michelle's ability to take responsibility for her part in the conflict is her lack of awareness of her involvement in it and its consequences.

6. If Michelle was fully aware of this conflict with Rae and its impact on her, what might she realize?

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She might realize that she is getting less than she could because of this situation with Rae and she needs a different strategy if she truly wants to get his opinions and truly no longer wants to feel frustrated when she deals with him. She might realize that this latent conflict is causing her loss of energy which she could put to more productive use.

Here is **my answer**:

She might realize that:

- She is unsure and uncomfortable in this situation. She doesn't know how to deal with people like Rae who are passive and insecure.
- She is afraid that if she speaks up or expresses her feelings, she will be opening a "can of worms" that she won't be able to deal with.
- She is afraid that she will hurt Rae's feelings. Consequently, she is avoiding the conflict, resulting in a shallow and superficial relationship with Rae.
- Furthermore, she has been blaming Rae and even feeling resentment towards him, along with her irritation and frustration.

We realize that a big part of this problem is how Michelle (and Rae) perceive and interpret the situation and each other. If Michelle is to handle this "conflict" situation differently, she needs to think about it differently.

7. What may Michelle do to make a positive difference in how she perceives and relates to Rae and their unsatisfactory relationship?
 - Realize that she will get more positive results if Rae actually participates
 - Ask Rae to think about the issue before they meet because she really wants his opinion
 - Ask Rae what he thinks and then sit and listen
 - Confront Rae with her observation that Rae always agrees with her and ask him why - i.e. engage in a conversation about the problem
 - Underscore that when she asks for his opinion that she truly wants it (if she doesn't, then that's another issue entirely)
 - Tell him she wants a better ongoing relationship; she thinks their discussions could be more productive; and ask him what he thinks

Here is **my answer**:

- a. She could try to learn why her relationship with Rae is unsatisfactory – what is causing this poor communication between them. She could start by recognizing and setting aside her assumption that Rae is entirely to blame – that the problem is not simply that he is weak or weak-minded. Instead, she could presume that there is more going on here than meets the eye. In fact, it would be a pretty safe

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for her to assume that there is conflict between them that is adversely affecting relations between them.

- b. As part of her inquiry, Michelle could consider how her own attitudes, emotions and behaviours are contributing to this problem. As in any conflict situation, she could assume that both she and Rae have contributed their unsatisfactory relationship, and both are continuing to do so. This presumption and the inquiry that flows from it will help Michelle get a broader, deeper understanding of the conflict situation, including her role in it. Inquiry will help her overcome negative emotions and attitudes and develop the more positive frame of mind she needs to pursue a constructive approach to the conflict situation.
- c. Michelle could also think about why she might care about what Rae has to say. She needs to think through how her negative attitudes towards Rae affect how she relates to him. It is natural and normal for a person in conflict to view the "opposing" party in a negative, unfavourable way. This is true even in a latent conflict like this one. It is remarkable how, in a very real way, these negative perceptions become a self-fulfilling prophesy - when Person A perceives the worst in Person B, that perception becomes the reality.
- d. To the extent that Michelle can get beyond her negative perceptions and feelings towards Rae, she will be much more able to listen actively and attentively to whatever Rae has to say, to be more open and receptive to the valuable ideas and contributions that he has to offer.

Insight:

Imagine yourself in Michelle's position. Reflect on how you might have reacted to this situation before reading this material? Then, being as honest and realistic with yourself as you can, do your own self-assessment, answering the following questions:

1. What would your reaction have been in this situation before you studied the material in this lesson? What would you have thought and done?

I would probably have:

- Ignored Rae and what he has to say
- Excluded Rae from future decision-making if I could
- Assumed it's Rae's problem
- Avoided Rae as much as possible

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2. In what ways would your reactions, thoughts and actions have been counterproductive?

I would lose time and energy by allowing the situation to continue. Every time I had to deal with Rae (or anyone like him) I would be anticipating an encounter where I had to be on guard against getting sucked into Rae's insecurities. I would also be losing any creative ideas Rae might have to offer.

3. What can you be aware of about yourself in such a situation that limits your ability to communicate or deal effectively with someone like Rae?

I am afraid that I can't handle situations with insecure people well so I put up a communication barrier that holds them at bay – keeping me safe from wasting time and energy and getting frustrated. Ironically, I am already frustrated just thinking about dealing with people like Rae so the barrier doesn't do any good. And of course, I am expending more energy trying to keep people like Rae at bay than if I just dealt with the situation.

Experiment:

1. After reading the material and answering the questions in this lesson, what learning goal do you have to help you develop your own skills and abilities?

I can make an effort to become more aware of what I am actually feeling when I find myself in this type of situation. I think I feel fear that I can't handle Rae-types well but there may be other contributing factors that I am not yet aware of.

2. What specific actions will you take to get you to the goal you identified above?

I will:

- a. Identify a person or people in my life that trigger feelings of frustration in me
- b. Make a point to engage them in a discussion when I want their input
- c. Make a note of when I start to feel frustrated and how I react to that frustration

Learning:

Record your observations, experiences, reflections, analysis and learning in your reflective journal entry. (This student has written a personal reflection that described what happened when he carried out his plan, what he did differently, how it turned out and what he will do in the future. Names have been expunged from the journal)

My Learning Goal is to become more aware of my feelings and actions when I am in a conflict situation with a person like "Rae".

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I thought about this type of situation in my life and discovered that there are a number of people and situations like this when I become frustrated or that I avoid because I know they will frustrate me. I am afraid that I won't be able to handle the interaction and I will get bogged down by a person who seems to "hang" on me.

I chose a situation I have with a co-member of a non profit group I belong to who is very passive, meek and mild in his manner. He always agrees with me and flatters me about everything I do.

Yesterday, I made a point of engaging him in a discussion about a decision we have to make on the fundraising direction we need to take. I asked him what he thought and, after some prodding, he gave me an idea. That's when I noticed I was starting to get frustrated.

The interesting thing is that I was frustrated, not by his idea, but by how he presented it. When he presents an idea, he immediately puts caveats on it, pointing out the weaknesses in it and why it won't work. I became annoyed because he wouldn't take ownership of his idea. As a result, I was very tempted to turn him off and ignore him and his idea.

Instead, I tried to get past how he presented the idea to talk with him about the idea itself. It was a tough slog because I just wanted to throw up my hands in frustration. However, I did have a more successful discussion with him than in the past and as we talked he actually came out with some other good ideas that we are going to research and discuss next week. I really had to concentrate on what he said and not how he said it.

Now that I am more aware that it is his mannerisms and the way he phrases things that annoys me (and not his ideas), I have something to work with. In the future, I can try ignoring his mannerisms (instead of him) and listen to what he is really saying. I can engage him with his ideas rather than joining him in condemning them before they have had a chance to live. If I can decrease my frustration when I deal with him, I won't be "leaking energy" in this relationship.

Another thing I can do in the future is to sit down and talk with him about how he presents an idea and help him see the negative effect his presentation has on his good ideas.