

Dynamics and Functions of Conflict

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, we'll discuss the periods of change and immobility that often occur in conflicts and how conflict mapping can help in these situations. The particular areas of focus include:

1. Changes in Conflict During a Stalemate
2. Reasons for Changes in Attitudes and Perceptions
 - a. Hardening of Positions
 - b. Polarization of Attitudes
 - c. Benefits of Conflict

1. Changes in Conflict During a Stalemate

Conflicts are dynamic; they're always changing, even during a period of inactivity. In conflict, there can sometimes be a **stalemate**, or a situation where the conflict has reached an impasse.

In a stalemate, nothing is happening, and nobody is taking any action. Neither party is willing or perhaps even able to move forward to advance its interests. This immobility could occur for a variety of reasons, such as insufficient funds or the high risk of a loss that one of the parties feels is too great. When this happens, the parties may have difficulty deciding whether or not they should try to move forward.

🔗 **EXAMPLE** Carlos and Damian are in the middle of getting a divorce. Emotions are high, and the two cannot come to an agreement over possessions and custody of their children. They both want full custody, but the costs of this case are starting to become a problem. Neither party will give up certain conditions. They continue to live separately, and their teams are in a stalemate as they figure out what to do next.



TERM TO KNOW

Stalemate

A situation where conflict has reached a state of impasse; neither party is able or willing to take further action to advance its interests.

2. Reasons for Changes in Attitudes and Perceptions

Changes in attitudes and perceptions during a conflict can occur for a variety of reasons, and mapping the conflict can help identify them. Some likely reasons for these changes are:

- Hardening of positions
- Polarization of attitudes
- Benefits of conflict

2a. Hardening of Positions

In long-term conflicts, a **hardening of positions** is what happens when both parties strengthen their belief that their way is the only acceptable way to resolve the conflict. The longer a conflict goes on, the easier it is for those involved to take a harder stance on their positions.



TERM TO KNOW

Hardening of Positions

In long term conflicts, when parties strengthen the belief that their position is the only way to acceptably resolve the conflict.

2b. Polarization of Attitudes

Hardening of positions often results from a **polarization of attitudes**, which occurs when parties' attitudes toward each other move to even more negative extremes. This can happen during stalemates, but it's a particularly likely occurrence if there's been an escalation in the conflict itself.

An **escalation**, as you learned previously, is the movement of a conflict from a less intense or harmful stage to a more intense or harmful stage. Oftentimes, this manifests itself in a move from unrest and protests to actual violence between the parties. Mapping out these changes in attitudes and perceptions can help identify what is causing the escalation.



TERMS TO KNOW

Polarization of Attitudes

In conflict, when parties' attitudes towards each other move to more negative extremes.

Escalation

Movement of a conflict from a less intense or harmful stage to a more intense or harmful one.

2c. Benefits of Conflict

Through the mapping process, the intervener may discover that keeping the conflict going is a way of promoting an interest for one side. In other words, one of the parties may actually see the continuation of the conflict as beneficial in certain ways. These benefits could be anything from gaining more support to creating more awareness for the interests the party has at stake.

If this is happening, the conflict will likely continue to evolve. It may reach periods of stalemate during which attitudes and perceptions will still be changing, and then it may escalate or de-escalate again. Once an intervener becomes aware of a benefit to a particular party for continuing the conflict, that benefit must be considered as one of the party's interests in any conflict resolution process.



BIG IDEA

The conflict mapping process is a bit like putting the pieces of the puzzle together in order to understand how the conflict is progressing based on changes that would otherwise go unnoticed.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that even **during a stalemate**, or period of inactivity, **changes in a conflict** can still occur. There are several **reasons for these changes in the attitudes and perceptions** of the parties: a **hardening of positions**, a **polarization of attitudes**, and **benefits of the conflict** for one of the parties.

You now understand that conflict mapping is an excellent tool for the intervener during the resolution process because it can help get to the underlying causes of any changes that have occurred in the conflict, even during a stalemate. Good luck!

Source: Adapted from Sophia tutorial by Marlene Johnson.



TERMS TO KNOW

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Polarization of Attitudes

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Stalemate

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