

Interpersonal vs. Systemic Conflict

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, we'll discuss how to tell the difference between interpersonal and systemic conflicts in the workplace and how our perceptions of these conflicts are affected. The particular areas of focus include:

1. Interpersonal Conflicts, Structural Conflicts, and Attribution Bias
2. Conflicts with Both Interpersonal and Structural Elements

1. Interpersonal Conflicts, Structural Conflicts, and Attribution Bias

As you know from earlier lessons, **interpersonal conflict** has to do with the relationships between people. Interpersonal conflicts can occur anywhere, not just in the workplace.

On the other hand, **structural conflict** comes out of the actual rules and practices that are formalized within an organization; even more informal **organizational rules/practices** can sometimes lead to conflict.

When trying to determine which type of conflict is occurring, attribution bias can affect our view. As you know, **attribution bias** is the tendency to attribute more positive traits to members of one's own group and more negative traits to non-members.

Because people in the workplace have different groups based on departments and job titles, attribution bias can often present itself in this setting.

For this reason, a conflict that appears to be interpersonal can actually be structural.

IN CONTEXT

You are having what you perceive to be an interpersonal conflict with your supervisor over scheduling. You asked for some particular shifts off ahead of time, and you are suddenly told that your request wasn't granted.

You assumed that because of seniority, you were in line to get these shifts off. But there have been some new rules put into place in terms of how shifts are assigned, and your supervisor has to follow those rules. Doing personal favors for people based on seniority is not allowed anymore.

Maybe the supervisor doesn't personally want to operate this way, but they have no leeway with these new rules. Thus, this is really a structural conflict, but you can easily see it as an interpersonal conflict because of attribution bias. You tend to hold a little resentment towards the supervisor who is suddenly not giving you a privilege you've had in the past.

This can also happen around deadlines. Maybe your manager seems to keep pushing you and your team to work harder and faster. This organization has a very fast-paced environment, and it's currently understaffed. Your manager is pushing these deadlines, and you start to feel some resentment over the fact that your boss seems to have no regard for your life outside of work.

This feels personal, but your manager is actually getting pushed by people above them to enforce these deadlines. There's a systemic issue in terms of the work pace, and you're one of the components in the system. You're feeling the pressure from your manager, who's feeling the pressure from his or her manager.

You can also see attribution bias occur in a situation regarding promotion. A friend that you work with has recently been promoted to team leader. Suddenly, this person who used to be your equal is telling you what to do. He has a different role on the team now, and you feel like he's become kind of bossy. This person was part of your group, but now he's in another group.

Attribution bias makes it easier to give negative attributes to somebody in an out-group, and we often do this unconsciously.



TERMS TO KNOW

Interpersonal Conflict

Conflict based on interpersonal relational issues rather than structural factors.

Structural Conflict

Conflict caused by misaligned rules or practices of an organization.

Organizational Rules/Practices

Formalized instructions about behavior or action within a given organization.

Attribution Bias

A tendency to assign more positive traits to members of one's own group and to assign more negative traits to non-members.

2. Conflicts with Both Interpersonal and Structural Elements

While our labeling of a conflict is sometimes based on our personal perception, a conflict in the workplace does have the ability to be both interpersonal and structural.

IN CONTEXT

You have a manager who has to follow certain rules that are making everybody complain. This person is just not a very good communicator; he is kind of brusque and often comes off as rude. Because of this, there are some interpersonal elements that have always been at play with particular manager; these new rules that he is enforcing have made it even worse. The manager's communication style and the new rules are causing the conflict, so there are both interpersonal and structural elements involved.

In conflicts that are both interpersonal and structural, you, as an intervener, want to deal with this interpersonal aspects first during the resolution process.

Once you've dealt with the interpersonal, you can work together with the parties to brainstorm ways to address the rules, which are also causing conflict in the organization.



BIG IDEA

Conflict within a workplace is often caused by multiple factors. Some conflicts are caused by interpersonal factors, and others by structural or systemic factors; there are also times when both interpersonal and structural elements are present in the same conflict.

As an intervener, it's important to be able to notice and separate the elements involved. If you find yourself trying to resolve a conflict that is both interpersonal and structural, it's always good to deal with the interpersonal first, and then problem-solve the structural.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that there are two types of conflicts that can occur in the workplace: **interpersonal conflicts**, or conflicts based on the relationships between people, and **structural conflicts**, or conflicts based on the rules and systemic methods governing the organization. Because of **attribution bias**, or the tendency to attribute more positive traits to people within one's own group, some conflicts may appear interpersonal when they are actually systemic.

You now understand that some workplace **conflicts can involve both interpersonal and structural elements**. When you encounter this type of conflict as an intervener, the best course of action is to work with the parties to address the interpersonal aspects before trying to problem-solve the structural issues. Good luck!

Source: Adapted from Sophia tutorial by Marlene Johnson.



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