

# What is Conflict?

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## WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you'll learn about the definition of conflict in general terms, as well as the different aspects of conflict and how they appear in action. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

## 1. Components of Conflict

Welcome to the world of conflict resolution. Conflict is an unavoidable part of life. We've all been in a conflict at some point or another and maybe you've been unsure how to handle the situation. While it can't always be avoided, we can equip ourselves with the skills to successfully resolve conflict. So, let's start off with a basic introduction to conflict.

All conflicts share the same basic components. In basic terms, **conflict** is a form of relationship in which the members find their interactions in some way impeding their goals, their needs, or their well-being.

Conflict always involves **parties** of two or more individuals who are involved in the conflict and who have some sort of **relationship** with one another. The primary issue at the root of a conflict between parties is a **need** or an **interest**.



### TERMS TO KNOW

#### Conflict

A form of relationship in which members find their interactions in some way impeding to their goal, needs, or well-being.

#### Parties

Individuals involved directly in a conflict.

#### Relationships

An association between two or more people, involving some form of interaction.

#### Need/Interest

An action, belief, or physical item that a party perceives as important or essential to his/her satisfaction or happiness.

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## 2. How We Describe Conflict

Frequently when describing conflict, people are really talking about how they reacted to the conflict.

#### IN CONTEXT

You have probably heard or maybe participated in a conversation that went something like this: “I was so annoyed. Can you believe he did that? I told him... and he said to me... and I was just getting really upset. Then he said, ‘Well if you're going to be like that...’ and then just walked out the door.”

In this case, the person is describing a conflict by rehashing what they said, what they did, what the other person said, and how they felt. As human beings, this is a typical response; we see things through our own lens.

Thus, when talking about conflict, we tend to talk about it personally in terms of our own reactions and what we saw happening.

This is why, as you'll learn in this course, it can be helpful to step back and take a look at the basic elements in all conflicts—not only in terms of ours but also in terms of what is really happening.

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## 3. Conflict in Action

Conflicts can emerge in a variety of situations, where parties in a relationship feel their other needs aren't being met.

Let's look at some scenarios that illustrate different types of conflicts that could arise in everyday life based on the relationships you have with the people around you.

- **Conflict between friends:** Two friends are driving down the road together, and one person wants the heat turned up because she's cold and wants to be warmer. The other person in the car says, “No way, I'm going to open the window because I'm really hot in here. I need some air.” Here we have two conflicting needs: One person wants the heat up, and the other person wants the window open, and the heat down.
- **Conflict in a relationship:** A couple has a disagreement over money. John works hard and thinks he deserves a motorcycle. He's always wanted a motorcycle, and it's a hobby of his. Alice says, “No way. You're not buying a motorcycle until we put money into savings. We need to put money into savings first.” Again there are two conflicting needs: Alice needs a savings account, and John needs a motorcycle.
- **Conflict at work:** You are sharing the break room with a number of people. You always do the dishes and keep the area clean, yet there are others who never do the dishes and leave the space dirty. Sometimes there's even food rotting in the refrigerator. You need the break room kept clean, but others are not doing that. This puts you and your coworkers in conflict.
- **Conflict between groups:** A city has an environmental group that needs to have land and resources protected in a certain way. However, the city also has an industrial group that perhaps wants to use the land and resources for another purpose. These two groups are in conflict over how the city's space should be used.
- **Global conflict:** There are two different nations that have vastly different needs and interests. These interests could be political, economic, or social. As we have seen through current events, when conflicts between nations are severe enough, they can result in war.



## THINK ABOUT IT

Consider a time when you were involved in conflict. What was your relationship with the other party involved? What needs/interests were at stake in the conflict? How was the conflict resolved?

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## 4. Types and Sources of Conflict

There are a variety of conflict types which are described based on what the conflict centers around. See the table below for the descriptions and examples of each type of conflict.

Conflict Type	Definition	Example
Data-Based Conflict	Conflict based on lack of information/different interpretations of data	There's a report that you need to finish at work; however, you don't have access to the correct information. The fact that you must now wait for this information can lead to conflict. Or once you get the information, you don't understand how these conclusions were reached. Where do these numbers come from? The conflict here is that you disagree with the interpretation of the information that you've just received.
Interest-Based Conflict	Conflict based on unmet needs.	Money as a need. You would like to save money to plan for a vacation. You've been looking forward to a vacation because you work hard. Your partner wants to save that money in order to buy a new car. The two of you are fighting about exactly what to do with this extra money you have, so this is an interest-based conflict.
Relationship-Based Conflict	Conflict based on the relational patterns between parties.	Let's say you are working with somebody who's very organized. Everything has to be very structured, everything's in its place, and everything has a file. You may be somebody who is not quite that structured, and perhaps you have piles of papers on your desk. You always know where things are; they're just always in piles. Because you're a little bit more loose, maybe a little bit more messy, this can cause a conflict with the other person.
Structural Conflict	Conflict based on external forces that impede parties' goals or exercise of their rights.	On a personal scale, structural conflict is something people commonly encounter when dealing with a lot of policies or procedures that need to be waded through, such as trying to adopt a child. On a larger scale, structural conflict happens quite often within nations where people feel like their rights are being constricted by government. In the past, this led to the American Revolution.
Values-Based Conflict	Conflict based on clashing or contradictory beliefs.	One parent may feel very strongly about discipline, while another parent may believe in being more lenient. Parents may also disagree about what time their children should go to bed, when they should watch television, or what kind of television they should watch.

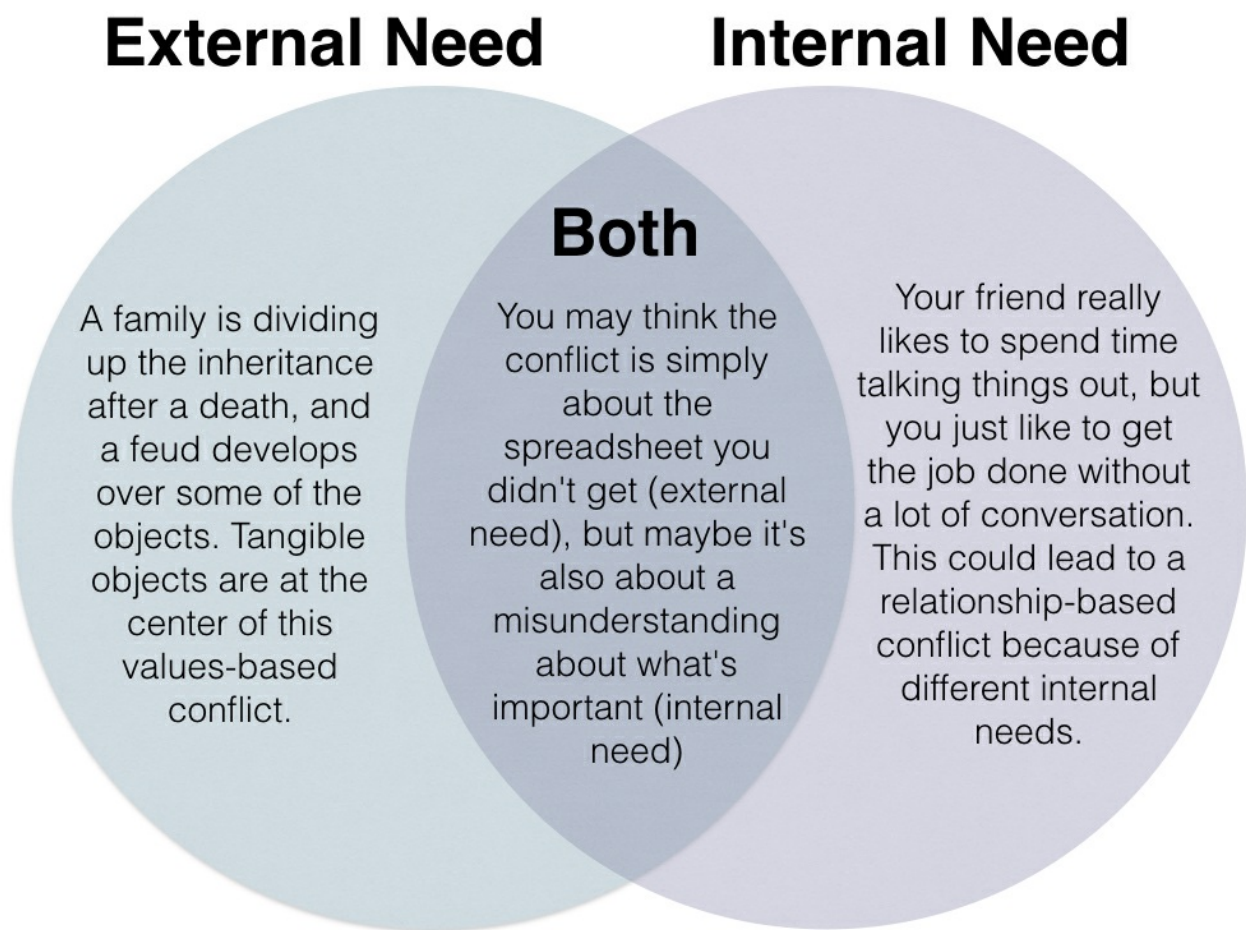


## THINK ABOUT IT

Can you think of conflicts you've had in the past for each conflict type?

As previously mentioned, conflict includes parties who have needs and interests. The conflict occurs because one party feels that its need or interest is incompatible with the other party's.

Needs can be either **external** or **internal**. It's important to realize that in a conflict, internal and external needs are not mutually exclusive. Let's look at the Venn Diagram below for some examples of conflicts involving internal needs and external needs.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### External/Physical Need

A need that is a physical, tangible object.

##### Internal Need

A need that is an emotion or other internal phenomenon.



#### SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned **how we describe conflict** in personal terms and looked at some examples of **conflict in action**. You now understand the **components of conflict**: a relationship in which the parties involved are interacting in a particular way because they feel that their needs and interests are being challenged.

You learned that there are five different kinds of conflict: data-based, relationship-based, interest-based, structural, and values-based. Knowing how to identify the **type of conflict** you're dealing with

can help you in formulating the best possible solutions. You also discovered that conflicts can arise from two types of unmet needs: external (physical, tangible object) and internal (emotion, or other internal phenomena). Conflict rarely comes from just one thing; when you get to the bottom of a conflict, you'll often find that it may have been caused by both types of needs being unmet.

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**External/Physical Need**

A need that is a physical, tangible object.

**Internal Need**

A need that is an emotion or other internal phenomenon.

**Need/Interest**

An action, belief, or physical item that a party perceives as important or essential to his/her satisfaction or happiness.

**Parties**

The individuals involved directly in a conflict.

**Relationship**

An association between two or more people, involving some form of interaction.