

# SHOULD THEY REALLY STOP FIGHTING?

Dealing with conflicts in organizations, a Gestalt approach.

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## Summary

In this article we present the Gestalt approach as a specific way of looking at and dealing with conflicts. Conflicts are often seen as a waste of time, as unnecessary, difficult situations. We avoid them or – if that is not possible anymore – try to solve them as quickly as possible.

The Gestalt approach, however, sees conflict as an intensive moment of contact and as an expression of important (hidden) issues in relations, groups or organizations.

Although conflicts can also be very destructive and hurt people, the Gestalt approach embraces conflict and invites participants to take the time to stay with it and explore it rather than focusing on quickly solving it, knowing that this approach will lead to better results on the long term.

## 1 Introduction

Conflicts are part of life and so, also part of organizational life.

Although, nobody likes to be in a conflict (there are exceptions!) and many of us try to avoid conflicts as much as possible, all of us are confronted with minor and major conflicts.

A common way of dealing with conflicts, especially in organizations, is to solve them as quickly as possible. Most of the time, this is done by means of negotiation, mediation or arbitration and sometimes by authoritarian interventions or decisions.

However, from a Gestalt point of view, we see a conflict as a fruitful, intensive moment of contact, from which we can learn; conflict can help us to take the next step in the development or evolution of the organization. It is seen as an important and valuable phenomenon in the field of the organization.

We do not want to deny the fact, that conflicts can also be very harmful or destructive, but most of the time, destructive conflicts are due to the fact that the original conflicts have been kept 'under the carpet' for too long or that people – in dealing with the conflicts - have been too much focused on quick solutions instead of taking the time to explore and process the conflicts.

In this article, we will present the Gestalt approach to conflicts as a possible view, attitude and method to deal with conflicts in a more constructive way with better results in the long term.

Before we speak about this Gestalt approach, we would first like to present a definition of the word 'conflict' and give some basic general information on conflicts. After that we will say some words about the basic principles of the Gestalt theory and subsequently we will translate these basic principles to the approach of conflicts.

We will end up this article by presenting a short case, which illustrates the Gestalt approach.

## 2 Definition and Perspectives

When we look in the literature on conflict we can find several definitions of conflict. A sort of basic idea in all these different definitions is the idea that a conflict is a state of discord caused by the actual or perceived opposition of needs, values and interests. A conflict can be internal (within oneself) or external (between two or more individuals).” (see e.g. Glasl, 2001; Fritchie and Leary, 2000; De Dreu, 2005; Euwema and Wild, 2006; Robbins, 1974; Mastenbroek, 1979 and Johnson and Johnson, 1995)

In almost all definitions we find some common elements, which in our opinion are basic to most definitions of conflict:

- there must be at least two persons or groups, who are related to each other
- there must be opposing needs, values, views or interests
- the opposing needs, values, views or interests exclude each other.

An important aspect in some of the definitions is, that the opposition does not have to be an actual one, it can also be a perceived one, which means, that it is not important if people agree on the actual opposition, but that it is enough if one of the participants perceives it as an opposition.

Finally, there is a difference between internal and external conflicts. In this article, we will restrict attention to external conflicts, that is, conflicts between two or more persons or groups.

At first, I like to offer you different lenses or perspectives to look at conflict. These perspectives are based on my experiences in dealing with conflicts and on the various perspectives you can find in literature. We can differentiate six perspectives:

1. The content perspective (what is it all about?)
2. The relational perspective (how far are the people involved and how did this influence the conflict and their relation?)
3. The procedural perspective (how did/do people handle the procedures to prevent or solve the conflict?)
4. The behavioral perspective (how does the behavior of the people influence the conflict?)
5. The organizational perspective (how is the conflict influenced/caused by organizational aspects?)
6. The cultural perspective (how is the conflict influenced/caused by cultural differences?)

## **2.1 The content perspective**

From this perspective we are interested in the simple, basic question: What is it all about? Although, this might seem to be a simple question, the answer is not always clear, but is crucial to the strategy or way we want to deal with the conflict. For example are we dealing with differences in vision, goals, values or interests or are we dealing with conflicts about tasks and responsibilities, or power or is it about the relation? Sometimes, at the surface the conflict seems to be about a difference in view or opinion, but actually, on a deeper level, the conflict deals with the question: How do we relate to each other?

From this perspective, it is important to know, how the participants define their conflict and if they agree on this definition. When there is a fundamental difference in definition, this is the first topic to discuss.

Sometimes, it helps to ask the participants what they think, the other might say about the definition or content of the conflict. This intervention can help to clear up possible projections

or gossip.

## 2.2 The relational perspective

The first question here is: Whose conflict is it? Are there just two persons involved or are we dealing with a conflict in a group or a team or maybe in the total organization? <sup>1</sup>

And what is our own position? Are we an 'outsider' or are we involved too? How do the others perceive us and how much do they trust us? This last question is especially important, when we are asked to intervene or consult or mediate.

According to the relational perspective we also have to look at the phase of the conflict or at the degree of escalation.

Is the conflict still (1) quite latent or implicit, or is it (2) open and acknowledged? Or, is the conflict already (3) increased and even hardened or (4) 'cold'. In that case, people are, for the most part, no longer willing to be in contact or involved with each other anymore.

The relation of the people involved varies regarding these phases of the conflict.

1. When a conflict is still *latent* or *implicit*, the people involved are working together in a 'normal' way. There are no open discussions, but under the surface we can notice some irritation and tension. One of the things, we can do in such a situation, is to share our awareness or perception of the situation and see if people recognize this.
2. When a conflict is *open*, the people are still in contact with each other and having open discussions or maybe even open confrontations or fights about the topic involved. We can work with the participants to reach a win-win situation by, e.g., process-facilitation.
3. However when the conflict is *hardened*, most of the times, the relation has become worse and we often see tendencies of de-personalization. The participants are probably more focused on reaching a win-lose or even lose-lose result. These are situations, where a conflict can become very destructive and violence can become a part of the conflict. We can try to improve the situation by process-facilitation or mediation, but sometimes we have to be very clear on the consequences of the situation and intervene or suggest arbitration.
4. When the conflict has turned into a *cold-conflict*, we'll first have to create commitment again. Most of the times, people are no longer in contact with each other. We can create this commitment by process-facilitation, but sometimes we need more 'power' and have to go into a confrontation or even have to make a decision based on authority.

## 2.3 The procedural perspective

From this perspective, we are looking at the question: How do people handle procedures to prevent or solve a conflict? In some organizations or teams, they have strict rules and procedures for handling a conflict, e.g., in many organizations, they have the rule that the first step in a conflict, is to speak about it with the other person(s) involved before speaking about it with others. Or, they have a rule that people have to consult the internal ombudsman or mediator before taking the conflict somewhere else. Breaking these rules can easily lead to an increase of the conflict.

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<sup>1</sup> As we will see later, from the Gestalt point of view, a conflict between two people in a group or organization never is a conflict of just these two persons. It is always connected to the larger whole (see page 5)

## **2.4 The behavioral perspective**

Another interesting and important issue to look at, is the question: How do the participants behave toward each other? Partly, the behavior is related to the phase or degree of escalation of the conflict, but partly it is also related to the specific person(s) involved.

Some people have a tendency to behave in quite cooperative and constructive ways, whereas others behave in more aggressive, passive or inactive ways. Some people are very authentic, where others are always behaving in a strategic or tactical manner.

As we will see later, the behavior of people is not totally standing on its own. It is also related to the whole of group or organization. Especially, when someone's behavior is extreme, it is wise to explore, how this extreme behavior is related to possible taboos of the group or organization to which this person belongs. (see also page 8)

## **2.5 The organizational context**

Especially when there is a conflict in an organization, we have to ask ourselves, what the function of this conflict is in relation to what is happening in the whole organization, or in relation to the development of the organization. Conflicts seldom stand on their own.

Somehow, they are always connected to the larger field of the organization. It is possible that the conflict is a sign of differences in tempo between two or more departments regarding the development of the organization, or the conflict is just an outcome or symptom of uncertainty, ambiguity or vagueness, which are present in all parts of the organization including management.

Some other possible causes for organizational conflicts are: lack of shared values or policies, vagueness in crucial aspects like goals, contracts, tasks etc., the internal and external economical situation, the social environment, the (power) structure and the culture (organizational, national or international) and especially discrepancies between the structure and culture.

A specific phenomenon, which can lead to conflicts, is the development or change in structure and culture in an organization, e.g., an organization that changes from a family structure and culture into a more business-like structure and culture often goes through difficult periods with many conflicts.

The old, traditional ways of decision making and handling differences do not function anymore, because they are no longer accepted, but the new do not function either, because they are not yet accepted.

## **2.6 Cultural perspective**

When we are dealing with conflicts in situations of international cooperation or in organizations, in which different nationalities or cultures are represented, we have to be aware that the cause for the conflict can also be cultural.

We have experienced several times that in organizations with different cultural or national backgrounds, many conflicts were caused by misunderstandings due to these cultural differences.

Our typical Western individualistic culture does not always match with the more collective or familial culture, like we have in Africa, or in the Middle East, or in China. If we force our Western way of dealing with negotiations, decision making, leadership etcetera upon Eastern organizations, we can expect a lot of – rather hidden – conflicts. But also in dealing with these conflicts, we have to be aware again of possible cultural differences in defining and handling

conflicts.

A nice illustration of these differences in culture can be demonstrated by the model of styles in dealing with conflicts according to Kenneth Thomas. (Thomas, 2002)

Kenneth Thomas differentiates five different styles of dealing with differences, which are related to the focus on the content of the conflict or on the relation.

His five styles are:

Styles	Focus on content	Focus on relation
1. Avoiding	--	--
2. Covering up / Giving in	--	++
3. Forcing on / Overruling	++	--
4. Compromising	+	+
5. Confronting / Negotiating	++	++

In our Western society, we see a preference for confronting or negotiating, while in Eastern societies we see a preference for covering up or giving in. This can easily lead to the misunderstanding that the Western person thinks that he has 'won the race', because his opponent is silent, but after a while he will find out, that nothing is won. His opponent was just silent out of politeness, but this does not mean he will follow the negotiated contract.

We had some similar experiences when we started to work in the Czech Republic. As Dutch trainers, we assumed that an agreement was an agreement. Our Czech colleagues had 'agreed' to all of our proposals: they did not oppose, but listened silently and even said "yes" to some of the proposals. Later we found out, that a Czech 'yes' does not always have the same meaning as a Dutch 'yes'. Due to the many foreign oppressors throughout the years, the Czech people have learned to be silent or to say "yes", in order to stay out of trouble.

So, cultural differences are influencing conflicts in more than one way at the same time: they can be the cause of a conflict and they also influence the style of dealing with the conflict, which – of course – can be a cause of a new conflict.

### **3 The Gestalt approach**

Now let us have a look at the Gestalt approach to conflicts. What is so special about this approach? To give an answer to this question, we first have to look at some basic elements of the Gestalt approach on groups, teams and organizations in general. After that, we can translate this to the approach of conflicts.

#### **3.1 The organization as a Gestalt**

From a Gestalt point of view, a group is seen as a gestalt, as a meaningful whole. This means that a group is seen as an entity in itself with its own dynamic and its own themes, which are definitely different from the dynamic and themes of the individual group members. There is a transcending dynamic and there are transcending themes which find their basis in the needs, experiences and behavior of the individual group members, but are not fully determined by

them. More than that, the individual behaviors in a group are rather an expression or reflection of this transcending dynamic and theme.

This is a crucial principle in reflecting upon teams in organizations. Here too, we can speak of a transcending dynamic and of transcending themes in teams. What at first may seem to be an individual issue or an issue of just two people might be an element of a common theme or development on the level of team or the organizational, when looked at it more closely. (Meulmeester, 2006 and Wollants, 2008)

Another principle is that each individual in a group or team reflects the transcending themes and has his or her specific function in this context.

This principle is also important for people who work with teams in organizations. Too often the behavior of an individual worker is only seen as an individual, personal event and therefore, possible reactions or decisions are only focused on this individual worker, with the risk that this worker will become a so called 'identified patient' or scapegoat.

However, the moment we realize the principle that the whole is reflected in each part, we can see that whatever an individual worker says or does is somehow connected to the whole team and the possible transcending themes of this team. With this in mind we get a better understanding of the behavior of this individual. We are better able to perceive it as a phenomenon in the field of the whole team and its environment.

This does not mean that this individual has no link to this issue. Of course this specific individual worker has a connection to this transcending theme otherwise he would not bring it out in the open. He resonates (the strongest) with this theme, presumably due to his personal history.

It is our experience, that the group or team member, who is most strongly connected to the transcending theme of the group, will bring this theme out in the open and make it visible.

We can compare this with the strings of a guitar. The e-string of a guitar will start to tremble with the sound of a piano, the moment someone hits the e-key of this piano. The sound of the piano will fill the room and because the e-string has the strongest connection to this e-sound, it will resonate first.

In a team where the rules and boundaries are not clear, the person, who has an issue with boundaries, will presumably begin to overstep the boundaries.

Therefore, it is important that we are able to see the behavior of an individual as a figure against the background of the team or organization as a whole, and the possible transcending themes that are present. Otherwise we risk perceiving the behavior as only a reflection of the individual and will put the person in the role of the identified patient, which will undoubtedly lead to the treatment of symptoms.

Another phenomenon in teams and organizations that we would like to describe is the tendency in groups or teams to attribute specific qualities to just one group or team member. And, of course, this will be done with the team member who has a specific connection to this quality or pole.

In a team which is afraid of conflicts and where nobody expresses any criticism, the team

member who resonates with hidden criticism or conflicts will pick up this denied quality and express criticism to others or start conflicts. When this person does his 'task' well, the team will attribute the quality of 'being critical' or 'going into a conflict' to this individual, while the rest of this team can stay friendly.

Unfortunately, people do not understand that this solution is only temporary and that this team has actually amputated itself.

### **3.2 Gestalt approach in dealing with conflicts**

What does the above mean for the way we like to deal with conflicts?

When we accept the fact, that every event in an organization is somehow related to the bigger whole, to the team or the organization in total, the first thing we like to do with such an event is to explore it.

So in case of a conflict, we like to explore how this conflict is related to the whole. This means that we will take the time, together with the people involved to look at this possible relationship.

When we say 'people involved', this does not only refer to the people, who are directly involved in the conflict, but also the others on this team or others in the organization.

Depending on the extent of the team or organization, we can decide to have all members in or just some key figures.

The first question we can ask ourselves and the people involved is: What is happening here and how do you think, this is related to other topics in the team or the organization?

Concerning the answer of the people and regarding our own awareness and ideas, we can decide to share our awareness or continue to explore the outcome of the people.

It is important that we keep on seeing the conflict as a part of the interacting field of the team or organization and that this conflict contains possible valuable information about the team and organization.

When we share our own awareness, it is important to do this in a non-judgmental way. The more we can stick to the phenomena we observed, the better it will be accepted by the others.

For a lot of people at first, this initial step of holding still and just staying with what is present in the here and now feels like a waist of time.

"Come on! Let's solve this conflict and go on with our real job!"

However, they forget that if we do not take the time to explore the conflict and just solve it as quickly as possible, chances are high that we are just solving the symptoms, not the real problem.

So, after a short period of time, the same conflict will come up again or a new conflict occurs, which is in fact – on a deeper level – just a repetition of the first.

By taking the time and staying with the here and now, we support people to increase their awareness of the situation and help them to explore the conflict on this deeper, implicit level. This demands that we and others are willing to explore and even appreciate the differences which might have led to this conflict.

Very often, people have the tendency to cover up the differences: "Come on! We all want the

same! The two of you just have a small difference in opinion, but for the rest we all think the same!!!!

With this tendency, we risk restricting our self in our creativity. Creativity can only flourish where differences are appreciated. So, by covering up the differences, we are also covering up our creativity.

It is because of the darkness, that we can enjoy the light of the stars.

However, by taking the time to explore the differences and maybe even for a while by making them a bit bigger, we can create tension and excitement again.

Related to this topic of differences is also the topic of polarities. Some differences are related to each other; they need each other to exist: we can only speak about 'darkness' if we also know 'lightness' or we can only speak about 'warm' if we also have an idea about 'cold' etc.

We call these kind of differences: polarities. A polarity is an opposition of two elements which are inextricably connected to each other, like the two sides of a coin.

When we are confronted with polarities, we sometimes have difficulties in handling them. We prefer one of the two poles or we even restrict ourselves to one.

If we like a person, we find it difficult to see his dark sides and vice versa: if we hate a person, we have difficulties in seeing the good sides.

This tendency can also be present in a team or organization and what we notice then, is that the team or organization as a whole tries to deny the pole they do not like or can not handle.

This denied pole can become the 'taboo'.

If we have a nice atmosphere in the team, we are afraid to lose it and, therefore, we easily restrict ourselves to stay nice to each other and deny the fact that we are sometimes irritated. After a while, expressing irritations or criticism has become a taboo on the team. Nobody does it anymore.

As a result of this restriction, one or two persons will start to represent this taboo: they are no longer happy with the situation and start to express irritations. But because they are the only ones doing it, *they have to do it for everybody*.

No wonder, they will have lots of conflicts with others and therefore, it is necessary that when we are confronted with a conflict like this, that we are not only looking at the people involved, but that we take a better look at the whole team and the function of the conflict in the team.

The conflict is not the problem; the conflict is just one of the ways the deeper, hidden problem in the team comes to expression.

That is why we say from a Gestalt point of view, that we sometimes embrace a conflict, because we see it as a valuable expression of possible hidden problems. The conflict invites us to take a better look at the situation in the team or organization.

A last concept, we like to discuss here is the phenomenon that a conflict can also be the first expression of a new step in the development of a team or organization.

When an organization is developing, it is possible that the 'new' (whatever it might be!) is not



yet fully present, but beginning to take its place. This can lead to frictions with the 'old', which can come forward by smaller or even bigger conflicts. We have to let go of the 'old' or even the 'old' has to be destroyed, before the 'new' can actually take its place.

If we would try to solve these smaller or bigger conflicts right away, there is a big chance that we are actually blocking this natural, healthy development.

As we have mentioned before, we have observed these kind of conflicts many times in organizations, which grew from a family run company to a business run company, but also in companies that grew bigger or companies which evolved from a pioneer phase into a more stable phase.

Especially, when the structure of the organization does not fit the new evolved culture anymore, many conflicts can occur. Solving all these conflicts one by one after the other, without taking the time to explore them in their wider context, will probably lead to a big waste of time and a lot of frustration. So, instead of solving the problem we can explore and facilitate it as a healthy opportunity to change.

Therefore, when confronted with a conflict in our organization, we can start with asking our self the question: "Should they really stop fighting?" "What might happen if we do not solve it?"

#### **4 Case**

We would like to end this article with a short case to illustrate the Gestalt approach in dealing with conflicts in organizations.

One day, we were asked to coach a team in a nursing home. There were several conflicts going on between the team members and this had a negative effect on the atmosphere in the team and also on the quality of care. Residents and their relatives complained a lot.

The team manager had already been speaking with the team members involved and every time it seemed that a specific conflict was solved, but after one or two weeks another conflict occurred.

Somehow he had the idea that something more was going on, but he could not lay his hands on it. Therefore he contacted us, to investigate what was going on and how he (or we) could handle the situation.

During our initial meeting with this manager and his assistant we observed several times that they both regularly interrupted each other, to correct a statement or to give an opposing view. It made us feel quite uncomfortable and confused.

After a while, we asked them to hold still for a moment and to look into what was going on.

When we shared our awareness with them, we noticed that it came as a surprise to them that they were interrupting and correcting each other and creating confusion.

So, we asked them if it was okay to look into this phenomenon a bit more and see how this was connected to their every day cooperation and communication.

During this conversation we and they discovered that they had some quite small conflicts too and that they also had different views on how to manage the team and how to organize the care for the residents.

Therefore we agreed, that before starting any team coaching we would first work with the two of them for a couple of times to explore their conflicts and differences and to see how this relates to the conflicts in the team and possibly also to other conflicts or differences in the larger field of the organization.

We met three times and each time we had asked them to prepare the meeting by doing some homework like writing down their view on management and care, their view on each other (qualities, compliments and critics), their ideas of the goals to be reached and – not unimportant – their view on the organization as a whole.

During the next meetings it became clear that both persons empathized with each other, which offered us a good, solid basis for further cooperation.

Further on it became clear, that their differences in views of care were not so big as originally presented, but that the differences were more present in the way they wanted to organize and manage the care.

When we explored these differences, it came out that the head of the department, who was working in this organization for a longer period than his assistant, had more problems in deviating from the formal structure and formal procedures than his assistant. The assistant just took the freedom to overstep the rules or to interfere with the formal structure, the moment he felt this was better for the residents or the staff.

Secretly, the head of the department admired his assistant for doing this, because he was convinced that his assistant was actually operating according the mission and goals of the organization, but the formal structure did not allow him to legitimate or support this behavior openly. And because he was afraid of having a conflict with his manager, he started to criticize his assistant.

It was clear, that this situation had led to unclearness and even a split in the team regarding the view on care and the procedures to follow.

So actually, we were dealing with a team in an organization, where one had decided to change the mission, goals and policy into a much more person oriented way of care, but the structure of the organization had not been changed according to this new policy. Therefore the ‘old structure’ did not fit the new policy anymore.

Both the manager and the assistant had the idea that this ‘problem’ was present on all levels of the organization, even on the level of the board. It was a publicly secret that there were big discussions going on about the structure in the board meetings and that some board members also had conflicts with each other.

So, our conclusion was that the problems and conflicts in this team were an expression or symptom of a deeper conflict in the total organization. Therefore, intervening only on the level of this team would probable not bring a solution, but be doing just ‘more of the same’.

When this became clear, we agreed on having a meeting with the general manager to share our view with him.

The manager was very willing and open to listen to us and in fact, he recognized the problem and actually, this outcome encouraged him to bring the topic up to the board again.

He even asked us, if we were willing to coach the board in dealing with this problem properly.

We attended the board meeting twice and we were able to support them in having an open discussion on the structure and how to adjust this structure more to the culture they wanted to achieve. What was very important during these meetings was the step of going back to the initial goals and mission of the organization and see if there still was a general commitment to this. This was in fact the case and it was clear that everyone was willing to improve the situation, but that they did not know how to do it. Therefore, we suggested that they visit some other organizations, which had dealt with this challenge in a proper way and see how this could inspire them. Not to copy their solutions, but to become inspired by them.

We also suggested a colleague consultant who is specialized in developing structures which contribute to a person-oriented culture in healthcare organizations.

Later we were informed that – with the support of this other consultant – the organization had changed the formal structure in a much more suitable structure, which gave more space and freedom to the departments to have their own budget and competence and to make their own decisions. This dramatically increased the possibilities to work in a more person-oriented way.

Another result, which we encountered, was the fact that the moment the manager of this department and his assistant became aware of what was going on between them, their attitude and behavior towards each other and the team changed and by that, the situation for the team became much clearer.

After a few weeks the team, as well as the residents and their relatives reported much more satisfaction and positive feedback. Also the rate of illness among the team members decreased significantly.

The change in the formal structure consolidated this positive development in the department.

Our conclusion was that it was a good thing that we did not just solve the conflict between the workers or between the manager and his assistant, but that we took the time to explore the conflict in its broader context, to see how it was connected to the larger field of the organization and by that, gain more insight in the underlying phenomena and created a solution, which had a much better result on the long term.

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