Resolving Issues with Your Boss (Part 18B):
The Tribulations of Collaboration – Psychological States

By

Mark Lefcowitz
Senior Process Engineer

Summary of Part 18A

Part 18A was the first part of a two-part examination of the internal issues constraining collaborative effort in the workplace. It examines various factors that contribute to workplace dysfunction, from communication issues to structural problems. The essay identifies key contributing elements. The essay then proposes strategic solutions. It emphasizes the interconnected nature of workplace challenges and advocates for a systematic, collaborative approach to implementing solutions through prioritized, sequential processes.

Introduction

So far in this series, we have chewed around the edges of the complex web of human behavior and its underlying cauldron of emotions that can be found anywhere humans congregate and interact. Our focus has been in the workplace, for it is there that the cumulative skills and energies of the group are harnessed to accomplish group activities and goals.

Yet beneath the surface of professional interactions lies deeper psychological dynamics—one where personal identities, histories, and aspirations collide with organizational structures and expectations. These invisible currents shape our workplace relationships in profound ways, often determining whether collaboration flourishes or flounders. As we delve deeper into workplace dynamics, we must acknowledge that each organization represents a unique ecosystem of personalities, power structures, and unwritten rules that employees must navigate daily.

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Understanding these elements is not merely an academic exercise — it is the reality of modern life. Even in circumstances where we may feel that our current job is only a temporary necessity or perhaps a stepping stone to something else, most of the time we strive to avoid unnecessary workplace conflicts. We would all like opportunities for professional and personal growth. But because we understand the realities of self-sufficiency, we also understand that the possible psychological states of our line managers and coworkers can make our workday lives interesting, bearable, or miserable.

It's not something that any can successfully run away from, for long. It is better that we try to understand what is going on, and deal with it in a structured fashion.

Psychological states are cognitive biases and mental frameworks that influence how we perceive, interpret, and respond to conflict. Regardless of experience or expertise, we are all susceptible to these biases, which can distort judgment, fuel misunderstandings, and escalate disputes. Recognizing some of the behavioral signs of these psychological states is crucial for improving communication, fostering empathy, and employing effective strategies to manage and reduce conflict in professional and personal interactions.

Individual States

Anchoring Bias
Anchoring bias occurs when individuals rely too heavily on the first piece of information they encounter (the "anchor") when making decisions. In conflict resolution, the initial terms, offers, or information provided can heavily influence subsequent negotiations or judgments. To mitigate anchoring bias, it's important to consider all available information and approach negotiations without being overly influenced by initial positions (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974).

Attribution Bias
The tendency to attribute others' actions to their character or personality while attributing one's behavior to situational factors is known as, "Attribution bias." In conflict resolution , this bias can distort understanding the other party's intentions, often leading to misunderstandings or resentment. To overcome attribution bias, it is essential to examine the context of the other party's actions and avoid making assumptions about their motives (Mathisen et al., 2011).

Cognitive Dissonance

As previously discussed in Part 03, cognitive dissonance occurs when individuals experience discomfort from holding conflicting beliefs or attitudes. This may occur when a person must reconcile opposing views or behaviors. They may change their attitudes or justify their behavior to resolve the discomfort. Understanding cognitive dissonance can help identify when a party may be reluctant to change their stance due to internal psychological tension and can guide efforts to help them reduce dissonance constructively (Festinger, L. 1962).

Confirmation Bias
Confirmation bias is the tendency to seek, interpret, and remember information that confirms pre-existing beliefs or opinions while disregarding contrary information. In conflicts, this can cause parties to ignore helpful insights or avoid considering alternative viewpoints, potentially prolonging the dispute. Conflict resolution requires openness to new perspectives and the ability to challenge one's assumptions (Nickerson, 1998).

Escalation of Commitment
Also known as the "Sunk Cost Fallacy", this psychological phenomenon occurs when individuals continue to invest time, money, or effort into a decision or course of action despite new evidence that suggests it may not be the best choice. In conflicts, parties may become entrenched in their positions, continuing a dispute even when it is no longer productive. Recognizing escalation of commitment can help prevent stubbornness and encourage more flexible, rational decision-making (Staw, 1981).

Loss Aversion
Loss aversion is the tendency to fear losses more than equivalent gains. This bias can cause parties to be risk-averse, unwilling to compromise, or overly focused on avoiding perceived losses during a conflict. Understanding loss aversion can help negotiators frame offers in ways that highlight potential gains rather than losses, increasing the likelihood of reaching an agreement (Tversky & Kahneman, 1979).

Overconfidence Bias
Overconfidence bias occurs when individuals overestimate their knowledge, abilities, or control over outcomes. In conflict resolution, overconfidence can lead to unrealistic expectations, poor decision-making, or an unwillingness to consider alternative viewpoints. Encouraging self-reflection and awareness of one's limitations can counteract this bias and promote more balanced decision-making (Moore & Healy, 2008).

Projection Bias
Projection bias occurs when individuals assume others share their feelings, thoughts, or preferences. This can lead to miscommunication or misunderstandings in conflicts, as one party may assume that the other party feels the same way or has the same interests. Being aware of projection bias helps to ensure that all perspectives are taken into account during resolution efforts (Loewenstein, et al., 2003).

Psychological Reactance
Psychological reactance is when people perceive their freedom to choose is being restricted, leading them to act in opposition to what is being imposed. In conflicts, if one party feels coerced into a solution, they may resist the resolution even if it is in their best interest. Understanding this reaction can help negotiators present solutions in a way that feels voluntary and preserves the other party's autonomy (Brehm, 1966).

Regret Aversion
Regret aversion refers to the desire to avoid making decisions that could lead to feelings of regret. In conflict resolution, this can cause hesitation or indecision when parties fear making the wrong choice. Understanding regret aversion can help create a more supportive environment where individuals feel comfortable taking action without the fear of future regret.

These psychological states and biases play a significant role in shaping behavior, perceptions, and interactions in conflict resolution. Recognizing them can improve awareness and effectiveness when navigating conflicts (Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007).

Self-Serving Bias
Self-serving bias refers to the tendency to attribute successes to one's own abilities and failures to external factors. In conflict resolution, this can make it difficult for a party to acknowledge their own role in the dispute. By recognizing self-serving bias, parties can be encouraged to take a more balanced view of the situation, promoting mutual accountability and cooperation (Miller & Ross, 1975).

<u>Social Comparison Theory</u>
Social comparison theory suggests that individuals determine their own social and personal worth based on how they compare to others. This can lead to competitive behavior, as individuals feel the need to "win" or outdo others. Recognizing this bias can help focus on cooperative strategies, rather than fostering a competitive or adversarial dynamic (Festinger, 1954).

Group States

<u>Groupthink</u>

Groupthink is a psychological phenomenon where a group of people strives for consensus and harmony to the detriment of critical thinking and alternative viewpoints. In conflict resolution, groupthink can result in poor decision-making, as dissenting opinions are suppressed or ignored to maintain unity. While it can reduce short-term conflict, it often leads to flawed resolutions and group polarization. To prevent groupthink, it is essential to encourage open discussion, promote diverse perspectives, and allow for independent thinking. Recognizing and addressing groupthink can lead to more balanced, thorough, and effective conflict resolution (Janis, 1972).

<u>Ingroup-Outgroup Bias</u>
Ingroup-outgroup bias is the tendency to favor those who belong to one's own group (ingroup) and to view those from outside the group (outgroup) negatively. This can intensify hostility or mistrust between groups. Conflict resolution strategies that focus on shared interests, superordinate goals, and building empathy can reduce ingroup-outgroup biases (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

<u>Status Quo Bias</u>
Status quo bias is the preference for things to remain the same rather than change, even if change would be beneficial. In conflict resolution, this bias can lead individuals or organizations to resist necessary changes or solutions, preferring familiar but dysfunctional patterns. Recognizing status quo bias can help negotiators emphasize the benefits of change and reduce resistance (Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988).

Individual & Group States

<u>Framing Effect</u>
The framing effect refers to the way information is presented, which influences how it is perceived and acted upon. People react differently to the same facts depending on whether they are framed as a gain or a loss. In conflict resolution, the way an issue is framed can significantly

impact the outcomes of negotiations. Reframing a conflict or problem positively can encourage collaboration and mutual understanding (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981).

<u>Mirror Imaging</u>

Mirror imaging is a cognitive bias in conflict resolution where one party assumes that the other party shares the same values, beliefs, or goals. This can lead to misunderstandings and miscommunications, as parties may project their own perspective onto others. In conflict resolution, mirror imaging can hinder negotiation or reconciliation because it overlooks the other party's unique views, needs, and interests. To counteract mirror imaging, it's important to actively listen, consider the other party's perspective, and engage in empathetic dialogue. Recognizing mirror imaging helps in developing more accurate and effective solutions that address all involved parties' concerns (White, 1970 and 1988).

Conclusion

While the list is long, you don't need to be a psychologist to deal with psychological states during workplace conflicts. The average person can still learn to recognize certain signs and use common-sense approaches, like staying calm, listening actively, showing empathy, and finding solutions, to de-escalate the situation. Over time, with practice, these strategies become more intuitive, allowing for healthier and more constructive interactions.

* Note: A pdf copy of this article can be found at:
https://www.mcl-associates.com/downloads/resolving_issues_with_your_boss_part18B.pdf

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