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Conflict management

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Routledge Handbook of Applied Sport Psychology
A comprehensive guide for students and practitioners
Edited by Stephanie J. Hanrahan and Mark B. Andersen
Conflict is inevitable in most domains of life, including sport, and throughout the lifespan. It is not surprising that issues of power and conflict are commonplace within sporting organizations and teams at all performance levels. Like most work environments, sporting organizations (e.g., teams, clubs) are complex, interpersonal, political, and hierarchical spaces in which there are status differences despite the need for cooperation and teamwork (Boud & Garrick, 1999; Mallett, 2010).

Conflict can be internal (e.g., intrapersonal tension between competing needs) but generally implies a disagreement between people. Conflict can occur between two people (interpersonal conflict), between members of a team (intra-team or intra-group), between groups (inter-group) and between a person and situational factors (Jowett & Lavallee, 2007). There are numerous examples of interpersonal conflict in sport – disagreement between coach and athlete in how the athlete should train leading into an important competition causing coach–athlete tension and conflict. Intra-group conflict in sport is also commonplace, for example, power struggles between two players seeking selection to the same playing position or reserves/substitutes criticizing current team members or the coach of a team. In applied practice, athletes may report the tension between living up to family values associated with drinking and cultural team practices (intra-personal conflict). Conflict can also involve people in specific situations (e.g., a player attending a function and a disgruntled fan verbally abuses the player for below-par performance in a recent match).

Conflict comes in different forms and pervades the sporting community at all performance levels and to varying degrees. Understanding and, when appropriate, managing conflict are important skills for practitioners. The consequences of conflict can be emotionally demanding, especially over an extended period. Often people procrastinate in dealing with conflict, which underscores the key role of a sport psychologist in helping coaches, athletes, and managers to reduce the conflict and its effects. This chapter will provide an understanding of: (a) conflict within the sporting context, (b) individual styles of conflict, and (c) a problem-solving approach to conflict management.
Understanding conflict

Conflict is universal and often occurs because people are competing for similar goals or resources. Competition can be a major catalyst for conflict because in competition there is usually a winner and a loser. Conflict can lead to performance decrements, dissatisfaction, breakdown in communication, and negative emotions (Eunson, 2005).

The term conflict seems to be associated with battles (i.e., winners, losers) and usually has negative connotations, but can conflict be a good thing? A problem-solving approach to conflict may yield positive outcomes such as: better decision-making, behavioral and structural change, alternative perspectives, catharsis, and resolution of inter- and intra-personal strife (Eunson, 2005). Furthermore, understanding and managing conflict can be central to developing team cohesion and its subsequent influence upon player satisfaction with the team and perceived performance (Tekleab, Quigley, & Tesluk, 2009) as well as promoting a strong team identity (Gersick, 1989).

For the purpose of conceptual clarity, it is important to distinguish between conflict resolution and conflict management. Conflict resolution is an approach to conflict that usually involves the reduction or elimination of conflict. Conflict resolution is aimed at achieving a positive outcome for both parties; this outcome, however, is rare. Quite often the resolution is temporary because only the symptoms (rather than the causes) are reduced or removed. Resolving conflict may not be the most effective approach in some conflict situations. For example, bringing to the surface players’ thoughts and feelings about an issue of infidelity concerning two players on the same team might escalate the conflict. Conflict management is an approach to conflict that may involve the elimination, reduction, or increase of, conflict. Some conflicts cannot be resolved, and perhaps monitoring conflict and reducing its adverse effects (conflict management) is a desired outcome. Strategically attempting to manage conflict can be dangerous because the key issues can be much deeper than initially thought and thinking we can always manage conflict is sometimes ambitious and foolhardy. The focus of this chapter is conflict management, but conflict resolution is also a possible outcome.

Causes of conflict

There are many causes of conflict that may work in isolation but often function in combination with each other. Conflicts are variable, and accurately identifying the cause(s) of a conflict is key to managing or resolving it. Some major causes of conflict (Eunson, 2005) are outlined below.

Scarce resources

Often two people want the same thing: for example, competition between two players for the same playing position within a team. Likewise, two assistant coaches wanting responsibility for the more important coaching tasks, and consequently greater recognition of their coaching abilities, might cause conflict between them. Conflict can often result when two or more people want something that cannot be shared.

Adversity

Poor athlete and team performances might increase stress and become a catalyst for conflict between coaches and athletes/teams. It is not uncommon for people to blame others for poor
performances. In team sports, one coach might blame another coach for the team’s poor performance, creating tension between them. In individual sports, such as swimming, it is not unusual for athletes to blame the coach for their poor performances. Of course, if people view cooperation as the key to resolving the poor performances there is less likelihood of ensuing conflict.

**Faulty communication**

Ineffective communication (e.g., miscommunication, lack of communication) is a major cause of conflict (Athanasios, 2005). Team sports are fertile contexts for conflict, partly due to the competition for places, but also because coaches are required to communicate with many people in the team (including ancillary staff), a time-consuming task. A football head coach, who has a squad of 40 or more players, faces considerable communication challenges. If he were to spend 15 minutes with each player each week, that would equate to almost 1.5 days of work each week. Limited time and the need to be succinct can promote misinterpretation. The development of effective communication skills is central to reducing spiraling conflict.

**Perceived differences**

Sporting groups are increasingly populated by people from different cultural backgrounds, which may splinter and alienate people. Limited understanding and acceptance of people from different cultural backgrounds can be sources of tension between individuals and subgroups within teams (see Chapter 48). For example, differing religious beliefs might cause team members to view player alcohol consumption differently.

**Biology**

Some physiological psychologists (e.g., Burgess & McDonald, 2004) have suggested that people have a predisposition to be in conflict, and to resolve it through verbal or physical aggression. In contrast, other psychologists (e.g., Ury, 2000) have viewed such behaviors as learned. The opposing views should be considered in understanding and managing conflict, especially violent behaviors.

**Health**

Sub-optimal physical health may also be a cause of conflict. When the body’s immune system is under threat, people tend to become less tolerant of others’ behaviors. For example, a player who is normally tolerant of another player’s arrogant behavior might under less than optimal health verbally berate the person (aggressive reaction) for being arrogant.

**The conflict process**

The *conflict spiral* is a general model of conflict development that suggests a fairly predictable developmental sequence of conflict events and perceptions (Eunson, 2005). Initially, conflict might start out of the public gaze. For example, one player’s seemingly innocuous comment to another player may be interpreted by the receiver as deliberately aggressive, but
other players in the team may not interpret the comment as a sign of any tension between the two players. Over time, as the conflict escalates and the comments become more critical and emotionally charged; the tension becomes more public than before. Critical incidents can fuel the conflict, causing people to view only the negative aspects of someone’s behavior and ignore any positive aspects. As the conflict escalates, emotions can override rational thinking and cause heated arguments, provocation, possibly retaliation, and perhaps physically aggressive behaviors. When attempting to reduce the conflict, emotions must be brought under control. The sport psychologist, who (one hopes) is perceived as neutral, can play a key role in reducing the emotions of those people involved in the conflict. A useful starting point in mediating the discussions might be acknowledging the perspectives of all people, which can contribute initially to some reduction in emotions. Once emotions are under control, open communication, including disclosure of thoughts and feelings, is possible.

Challenging the spiral early in the process reduces the potential of the conflict spiraling out of control. In the conflict situation, it is one’s choice to attempt to resolve or, at least, manage the conflict. Central to any challenging of the conflict spiral is the need to understand and appreciate the emotions of the parties involved before attempting to reduce those emotions.

There are several ways to challenge the conflict spiral at different stages of its development. In the covert stage, challenging negative comments, gossip, and a lack of cooperation can be effective in reducing the potential for conflict to escalate. In the overt stage of conflict the sport psychologist should identify, and subsequently challenge, any distorted perceptions, intimidations, and pressures (Eunson, 2005). Successfully challenging distorted perceptions of an issue, through gentle questioning, paraphrasing, and reframing, might be helpful in reducing emotions, and provide the platform for managing the conflict. Moreover, the sport psychologist should resist recruitment to one side (Eunson, 2005).

Conflicts in the coach–athlete relationship

Although there is considerable anecdotal evidence reporting conflicts between coaches and athletes, there has been little research examining that specific topic (Jowett & Lavallee, 2007). This limited examination of conflict within the coach–athlete relationship is surprising considering the problematic nature of coaching. Sports coaching has been described as a complex, social, and dynamic endeavor that can be viewed within a broader set of relations including the interdependency between coaches’ interactions with other people (e.g., athletes, other coaches, parents) and the coaching situation and context (Mallett, 2008). This problematized view of coaching mirrors the turbulence in which coaches operate where their emotional connections with athletes are central to coach–athlete–performance relationships. When performance expectations are not met, one party may blame another for the cause, which can be the catalyst for tension between coaches and athletes and between players on a team. For example, when a team is performing poorly, players look for reasons and often lay blame on less skilled performers, which can be the cause of conflict in sporting teams. Common reasons cited for underachievement in sport include poor communication, lack of warmth in relationships, mutual dissatisfaction, limited interaction, mistrust, varying need–satisfaction, insufficient support, incompatibility, and power struggles (Jowett, 2003; Poczwardowski, Barott, & Henschen, 2002); all of which can independently and collectively lead to dissatisfaction, distress, frustration, and anger (Jowett, 2003), and have the potential to increase the probability of conflict occurring between coaches and athletes.
Interpersonal conflict has, at least, two dimensions: content and emotion (LaVoi, 2007). Moderate levels of content conflict (e.g., disagreement between coach and athlete about a training method or how to solve a problem), if expressed unemotionally and with the intention of a positive outcome for both parties, can lead to healthy debate between the two individuals and have the potential to facilitate optimal solutions and perhaps enhance performance. In contrast, emotional (relational) conflict can be debilitative to performance, among other things, producing distrust and suspicion. LaVoi suggested that the inability of people to differentiate between content and relational forms of communication causes most interpersonal conflict.

Although conflict between coach–athlete and athlete–athlete dyads is relatively common, less so is the conflict between a sport psychologist and a client. Nevertheless, tension between the practitioner and the client has the potential to nurture or thwart the relationship and subsequent outcomes. Another common source of conflict is between sport psychologists and coaches, which is a concern for the profession. Coaches’ support for sport psychologists assisting the coach–athlete–performance relationship is paramount to future work for practitioners. Athletes often have conflict with their coaches, and in dealing with athlete–coach relationship issues (e.g., athlete dissatisfaction with coach), sometimes sport psychologists marginalize coaches. This sidelining of coaches is not usually perceived well by them and can lead to an escalation of the tension between coach and athlete. Coaches and athletes should be supported and engaged in attempts by the sport psychologist to manage coach–athlete conflicts.

Individual styles of conflict

Typically, people find conflict unpleasant and anxiety provoking. How we respond to conflict is arguably a learned (and consistent) behavior (Ury, 2000), which means we can re-learn how we deal with conflict. The Thomas-Kilmann model of conflict-handling styles (Shell, 2001; Thomas, 2003) is based on the premise that people tend to have dominant reactions (styles) to handling conflict. In the Thomas-Kilmann model, handling conflict occurs along two basic dimensions or continua of behaviors: (a) assertive to unassertive (i.e., high to low concern for self), and (b) cooperative to uncooperative (i.e., high to low concern for others). The five styles of conflict handling include competing, collaborating, compromising, accommodating, and avoiding.

Competing (dominating) involves assertive but uncooperative behaviors between two parties (i.e., high concern for self and low concern for others). It is associated with the pursuit of one’s own goals at the expense of positive relationships with others. For example, in a relay team one athlete chooses to produce high quality work when training individually, but not when with other members of the team in specific group training sessions. This style has the potential to be used aggressively. For example, people can use this style to coerce (e.g., bully) others into their way of thinking or viewing the world. In the case of the relay team, a personal coach might coerce another sprinter in the relay team to undertake the same training as his own sprinter so as to advantage the preparation of his own sprinter. Unfortunately, coercion can lead to further conflict.

Collaborating (integrating) involves assertive and co-operative behaviors between parties (i.e., high concern for self and others). Engagement in a truly collaborative approach to conflict can be highly productive, resulting in improved communication and problem-solving. The successful use of collaboration will promote further use of this style, increase
communication, and develop healthy relationships. Viewing conflict as potential for personal growth is likely to reduce the negative effects of conflict. Perceptions of conflict can change from negative to positive and lead to productive outcomes for the parties involved.

The collaborative style of dealing with conflict is a key strategy to use on a regular basis. Research has shown that teams with higher levels (compared with lower levels) of emotional intelligence preferred to use collaboration in preference to other conflict styles (Jordan & Troth, 2004).

Compromising involves a balance between unassertive–assertive and cooperative–uncooperative behaviors (i.e., moderate concern for self and others). Addressing conflict in most situations is helpful, but compromising one’s views might lead to partial satisfaction of the issue. For example, coaches might benefit from exploring players’ views on curfews the night before matches and subsequently negotiating with the players about an appropriate decision on team curfews.

Accommodating (obliging) involves co-operative but unassertive behaviors (i.e., low concern for self and high concern for others). This approach to conflict involves people viewing relationships with others as more important than satisfying their own needs. This style results in submissiveness to the demands of others. For example, coaches might accommodate the views of the players because they do not want to upset the players too much. The accommodating style of dealing with conflict can be effective in some situations, for example, when appreciating the importance of building harmony within the team, and when an issue may be of greater importance to another person.

Avoiding involves uncooperative and unassertive behaviors (i.e., low concern for self and others). Avoidance can be used to either ignore the conflict (and hope it goes away) or as a deliberate strategy to control the situation. For example, anecdotal evidence suggests that often people ignore a conflict situation and hope it fades away and sorts itself out, but resolution rarely happens. Some people do not like to confront conflict and therefore tend to ignore it rather than deal with it and seek solutions. In some cases, avoidance can be an effective strategy, for example, a coach may deliberately avoid a player’s issue to let an athlete calm down before addressing an important issue, or when the potential negative consequences are not worth the time and effort of dealing assertively with an issue.

Athanasios and Tzetzis (2005) examined the ways in which Greek professional coaches (football, basketball, and volleyball) handled conflict in professional sporting teams. The coaches reported using all five styles in managing conflict, although unsurprisingly, the authors found collaboration and compromising to be the most effective and commonly used styles.

Managing conflict

Managing conflict within teams and training squads can be a major task for practitioners. The various conflict styles and the situations in which they can be effective are presented below.

Competing can be best used when decisive action is necessary, or on important issues upon which the best outcome is sought for the person making the decision. Often coaches are required to make tough and quick decisions about playing personnel. In the selection of team members (e.g., the final team composition for a grand final) the coach does not select a player who has a poor attitude but is considered one of the better performers (competing style).
Collaborating is effective when both parties have positive contributions to make to solving a problem. For example, in sporting teams collaboration between coaches and the players’ leadership group to formulate guidelines for agreed-upon behaviors for coaches and players within the organization can be effective in creating a consensus of opinion. This collaboration allows for the perspectives of all parties to be considered before making decisions on potentially contentious issues.

Compromising works well when time is short, and one needs a quick solution, or as an interim step toward resolving a more complex issue. For example, coaches might allow players to attend training late on particular occasions because they know they are having personal problems with their partners, or they are preparing for major university exams.

Accommodating is a style that can work well for coaches when others’ views on an issue seem germane, or when coaches believe the approach might facilitate team harmony. For example, a coach might believe that a team curfew when playing interstate should be enforced. The sport psychologist, however, may favor the involvement of the player’s leadership group in providing another perspective. In this case, accommodating the views of the players may yield several benefits to the coach–team relationship such as building team harmony through promotion of some player autonomy.

Avoidance is probably the style to use most sparingly. When the issue is minor or when the emotions are high and people need to have time to cool down, the avoidance style can be effective. An example is avoiding a discussion with players about their poor performances in favor of more pressing concerns such as poor attitudes to training. The style may also work well when another person (e.g., another player) can resolve the issue more effectively.

Each conflict style has the potential to contribute to reducing conflict, and knowledge of all five styles is useful. The key is knowing when to use the most suitable style for the specific conflict situation. Using a golf analogy (Goleman, 2000), a player should strategically use the most appropriate club (with or without the aid of a caddy) for the particular shot to be played. Sports psychologists (i.e., the caddy) can guide the coach (golfer) to use the most suitable conflict style (club) for the particular issue (golf shot) in seeking to manage the conflict. You can select the style for the particular situation, but may use some approaches more often than others (e.g., collaboration, compromising). From a practitioner perspective, encouraging coaches and athletes to be adaptable, tolerant, and skilled in the various forms of conflict style can reduce, and in some cases perhaps resolve, conflict. Nevertheless, people need to be realistic in what they can achieve in conflict management. There will be occasions when, regardless of the sport psychologist’s actions or interventions, conflict cannot be reduced or even managed.

In many situations, a problem-solving approach to conflict management is recommended, and the following quote serves to support the practice of using conflict styles that address the needs of both parties (e.g., collaborating, compromising):

The Navajo definition of conflict resolution is to restore harmony. Their experience has convinced them that if one ends a dispute by having a winner and a loser, one dispute may have ended but another dispute will have started because harmony will not have been restored. Behind this is the Navajo recognition that coercion is not an effective way to bring about genuine change in any individual’s long term behavior or attitude. Coercion works only as long as one is willing and able to continue the coercion. When the coercion stops, people generally revert to their prior ways, the only
real difference being that by then they will have become angry and resentful. Coercion is a short-term, not a long-term, answer.


The above quote highlights the concomitant issues of coercion and submission in dealing with conflict in selfish (competing) and submissive (accommodating) ways.

Minimizing the potential for conflict

Preventing conflict is impossible, but steps can be taken to minimize the potential harm of its development. The key roles of the sport psychologist in terms of team conflict are two-fold: (a) mediating between parties (e.g., coach and athlete), and (b) providing coaches and athletes with psycho-educational programs aimed at improving communication (e.g., assertiveness training). Practitioners in these roles of mediator and educator can assist coaches and athletes in reducing the potential for conflict in a number of ways.

A focus on effective communication is central to reducing the potential for conflict. Communication should be clear and nonjudgmental, with the focus on behaviors rather than the people. Remaining as calm as possible reduces emotional communication, which is often regretted after the fact.

Approaches to coaching that promote good communication in the coach–athlete relationship, and that are aimed to satisfy the needs of both parties, should be encouraged (e.g., promoting coaches’ autonomy-supportive behaviors rather than controlling and autocratic ones). Sport psychologists can encourage coaches to provide athletes with choices, rationales for tasks, non-controlling competence feedback, opportunities for initiative taking, and acknowledgment of feelings and perspectives while avoiding controlling behaviors (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003).

The development of emotional intelligence competencies of coaches and athletes may also be useful. Emotional intelligence (EQ) is concerned with the ability to manage oneself and one’s relationships effectively. EQ consists of four major capabilities: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and social skill (Goleman, 2000). Key emotional intelligence competencies underpin those four capabilities, which are fundamental to preventing and managing conflict. They include:

- emotional self-awareness;
- self-control, trustworthiness, adaptability;
- empathy, service orientation;
- developing others’ communication, conflict management, and teamwork and collaboration.

Summary

Sporting environments are complex, interpersonal spaces in which there are status differences along with the need for solidarity (Mallett, 2010): therefore, conflict is inevitable. The role of the sport psychologist in assisting coaches, players, managers, and parents in managing conflict is pivotal. Specifically, sport psychologists can work effectively with
coaches to enhance their interpersonal skills in dealing with conflict (see Box 35.1). There is a range of conflict styles that can be used effectively to deal with situational conflict, and the skill is matching the most appropriate style to suit the particular situation. Assisting others (e.g., coaches, athletes) in developing suitable interpersonal qualities (e.g., emotional self-awareness) can be a key challenge for sport psychologists.

Box 35.1

Practical suggestions for sport psychologists regarding conflict

- There are different forms of conflict – intrapersonal, interpersonal, intra-team, inter-team, and person–situation.
- Conflict is inevitable in the sporting domain; so understand the different forms of conflict and the conflict process.
- Assisting coaches, players, and parents to deal with conflict is a common work task for sport psychologists.
- There are many causes of conflict – identify the cause/s before attempting to manage the conflict. Deal with conflict as soon as you have sufficient information on how to best mediate discussions between people.
- The conflict spiral is a general model of conflict development.
- There are several conflict styles – competing, collaborating, compromising, accommodating, and avoiding.
- Appreciate that some people have a dominant conflict style, but many people can learn other styles.
- Adopt a problem-solving approach to conflict management: be strategic in dealing with conflict. Understand the situation, and select a suitable style.
- A problem-solving approach to conflict can lead to growth in individuals and teams/groups.
- The development of emotional intelligence competencies (e.g., emotional self-awareness, self-control, empathy) can improve communication and the ability to circumvent conflict and manage it.

References


