It is all too easy to sit in one's logic bubble and dismiss other points of view, and disputes within organisations are put down to people being difficult, to personality clashes or even to troublesome employees. Yet research has shown that the attitudes of difficult people account for a very small percentage of internal disputes.

Some senior staff have a tendency to blame problems on the personal shortcomings of their staff, citing, for example, laziness, lack of motivation or poor skills. This is their logic bubble when it comes to understanding poor performance and the causes of interpersonal disputes. But the people who work for them see things quite differently. Many of their difficulties they attribute to environmental problems. This is an example of differing perceptions.

Whetten and Cameron (1993) cite three organisational problems which cause what are seen as interpersonal conflicts:

1   Flaws in the information and communication systems. A significant message may not be received; a memo may be misinterpreted. Once the

facts are clarified the problem tends to be resolved, so it is always worth checking at source if a communication has not arrived or if one has stirred things up.

2   Incompatible roles. Many organisations are so complex that disagreement and dispute can arise between people whose tasks are interdependent but whose roles are incompatible. For example, disagreement may arise in an agency between those who are fundraisers and those who are field workers. Fundraisers may push for pictures of starving children being helped by aid workers, because that is seen to generate donations, while fieldworkers resist this as demeaning and counterproductive, creating an image of helplessness.

3   Stressful working environments. When the environment is fluctuating and uncertain, people can become anxious and over-sensitive. The regular restructurings within aid organisations and NGOs are a major source of stress that can affect personal working relationships. If an organisation is experiencing financial difficulties and going through a period of cost-cutting then people are bound to be edgy and uncomfortable.

Whetten and Cameron (1993) describe how people's responses to interpersonal confrontations have a tendency to fall into five different categories.

Table 10.1   Five approaches to negotiating and handling personal disputes

Approach	Objective	Supporting rationale	Likely outcome
Forcing	To get your own way	It is better to risk a few hard feelings than to give up on an issue you are committed to	You may feel vindicated, but others may feel defeated, even humiliated
Avoiding	To avoid having to deal with the issue	Disagreements are inherently bad as they lead to tension	Interpersonal problems are not resolved which can lead to long-term frustrations
Compromising	To reach an agreement quickly	Long drawn out disputes distract people from their jobs and can lead to bitterness	Over time people may seek expedient, rather than effective, solutions
Accommodating	Not to upset the other person	Maintenance of harmonious relationships should be a top priority	People may well take advantage of you
Collaborating	To resolve the issue together	The positions of all parties are equally important and equal emphasis should be placed on the quality of the outcome and the fairness of the decision-making process	The issue is most likely to be resolved. Also, all parties are likely to be committed to the solution and are satisfied that they have been treated fairly.

Adapted from Whetten and Cameron (1993; p. 33).

Not surprisingly, the collaborative approach is considered the most effective way to resolve interpersonal disputes and to negotiate a way forward. Whetten and Cameron (1993) argue that the other four approaches have serious drawbacks:

- Force and accommodation: in both, one side has to give way in order for agreement to be reached. This is the competitive approach, which relies heavily on taking a competitive stance and on the assumption that someone will lose out. Both also depend on power relations, with the stronger party using their formal or informal authority to push through the desired decision. The dangers are lack of real discussion and potential backlash.

- Avoidance: in conflict resolution this means that people avoid attempting to solve things, as they believe the costs to be too high, so the problem is left to simmer.

- Compromise: everyone involved makes sacrifices to find common ground; the split-the-difference line. Expediency is all-important, which leads to more rapid decisions but also promotes game playing, particularly asking for twice as much as needed at the start.

By contrast, collaboration is seen as win–win, in which both sides gain. Done well, it encourages both sides to clarify their own self-interest and goals. But it is the most difficult approach to use successfully as it requires considerable interpersonal skills.

Whetten and Cameron (1993) and Northcraft and Neale (1990) describe similar collaborative negotiating strategies:

1 **Be clear about the issues.** What is the dispute or the disagreement to be negotiated? This requires research and creative thinking. Develop a range of possible ways forward.

2 **Establish common goals.** If all parties to the negotiation begin by focusing on shared interests and shared goals then they are more likely to appreciate the value of resolving their differences and reaching mutual agreement.

3 **Depersonalise the discussions.** Focus on the issue and separate it from the personalities involved. Aim to depersonalise discussions. Negotiators who are looking for revenge or trying to get one up on someone are likely to jeopardise the process. Consider the negotiators as advocates rather than rivals. Say 'That is an unreasonable position' rather than 'You are an unreasonable person'. But this is not to say that you should not consider the personalities of those involved. You will need to consider how you approach people in the light of their personality traits.

4 **Concentrate on interests and not positions.** Agreement is easier if all parties consider the interests or the reasons behind the stance or the demands being made by any one party. Try to understand why someone wants to achieve a particular objective.

5 **Come up with ideas that benefit everyone.** Use creativity to come up with mutually acceptable ideas. Brainstorming can help imaginative or novel ideas to emerge, increasing the number of options and thus the possibility of reaching a mutually satisfying agreement. Also, this approach will help keep the focus on collaboration rather than competition.

6 **Make use of objective criteria.** No matter how well-intentioned the parties are there is always the chance that incompatible interests will lead to disagreement or conflict. To avoid this, objective criteria should be agreed which will enable everyone to decide what is fair and reasonable. This will encourage people to focus on what is just and sensible rather than on getting the best deal for themselves. It also allows people to take a more open attitude and so avoid taking rigid non-negotiable stances.

7 **Define outcomes in terms of gain rather than loss.** Focus on what has been gained rather than what has not been achieved. A glass that is half full is more satisfying than one that is half empty.

8 Once you have agreed on a way forward, then be clear about the agreement and who will do what and when, so as to avoid misunderstandings. If follow-up activity or monitoring is needed, then agree how this is to be carried out, by whom and when.

In civil war and postwar environments, there are also at least three factors which make collaborative negotiation, between and within organisations, very difficult:

1 The civil war and postwar environment is rapidly changing, so everyone's information is partial.

2 Agendas of competing or important organisations, or even your own organisation, as well as decisions already made, may be antithetical to the needs of peacebuilding. For example, perhaps an important donor decides to exclude a certain violent leader from the peace talks, even though a carefully grounded analysis shows he commands a significant popular following with real grievances. Or you may find yourself in a situation where ever tighter restrictions imposed on field staff by head office make it more difficult to work.

3 Not everyone is what they seem. People may be unhelpful and even destructive in their behaviours. People may be acting out of self-interest, for example, pursuing objectives based on what is best for their own careers rather than what is best for the situation. People may lie, cheat, bully and intimidate to get what they want.

Use of information is one way to reduce the impact of these three factors. Within your own organisation, you can help your colleagues and superiors to understand and appreciate your concerns if you keep them up to date.

The information you provide – within your organisation, to others with whom you are negotiating, and to the media and public – should lead to an understanding of the day-to-day issues of peacebuilding. Use information carefully, to promote other options rather than to criticise earlier decisions and positions.