Module 4 Group Discussion
Conflict: Destructive or Constructive?

The field of organizational development has evolved to recognize that conflict often plays a functional role in an organization and may even be beneficial in some situations. However, we all have experienced situations when conflict has derailed an activity or decreased an organization’s effectiveness.

1) Break into two groups, each discussing one perspective on conflict.

Group 1: Discuss the potential benefits of accepting—even provoking—conflict. Use the following assertions as a starting point for brainstorming:
- Conflict is a means by which to bring about radical change.
- Conflict facilitates group cohesiveness.
- Conflict improves group and organizational effectiveness (e.g., begets innovation, teamwork, etc.).
- Conflict brings about a slightly higher, more constructive level of tension (e.g., providing motivation).

Group 2: Discuss the disadvantages of conflict. Use the following assertions as a starting point for brainstorming:
- The negative consequences from conflict can be devastating (e.g., poor relationships, decreased morale, inefficiencies).
- Effective managers build teamwork, and conflict works against teamwork.
- Competition is good for an organization, but not conflict.
- People who accept and stimulate conflict don’t survive in organizations.

2) Bring the groups back together. Present the main points from each group’s discussion. What is the group’s conclusion—is conflict is destructive or constructive? Is your answer different for conflict within an organization, program, or team, and conflict between organizations, programs, or teams?

This exercise is adapted from Stephen P. Robbins, Organizational Behavior, Prentice-Hall, 1998, pp. 467-8. Text in italics is a direct quote.