

Perception plays a key role in how conflict arises and is resolved

By Larry Dunn, Ph.D., SIA Conflict Resolution Specialist

This is the third part of a four-part Risk Review series on conflict

Conflict is an inherent part of human interaction, stemming from diverse perspectives, interests and values. The way individuals perceive and interpret situations plays a pivotal role in the emergence, escalation and resolution of conflicts.

Perception, understood as the process by which people interpret and make sense of their sensory input, greatly influences how we understand and respond to the world around us. When it comes to conflict, perception is a powerful determinant of attitudes, behaviors and, ultimately, the trajectory of our disagreements and disputes. In fact, there is no practical difference between perception and reality since our perception is our reality, whether right or wrong, and we may respond accordingly.

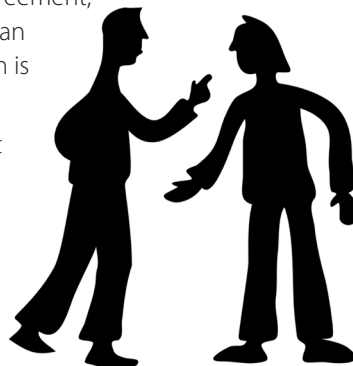
The Nature of Perception in Conflict

Perception in conflict is shaped by individual experiences, cultural backgrounds and personal biases. The lens through which individuals perceive events and interact with others significantly influences their responses to potential sources of conflict.

One of the key elements of perception in conflict is the attribution of motives. People tend to attribute intentions to the actions of others based on their own interpretations, predispositions and emotional states. This attributional process can lead to misunderstandings and miscommunication, laying the groundwork for conflict to arise.

In conflict, we may also perceive the actions of others that we would not normally be concerned about in a way that confirms our own perspective, thus seeing a direct connection between things that might not be related at all. For instance, if my favorite mug is broken by someone with whom I just had a disagreement, I may think it was the result of an intentional act rather than an accident. In such a case, my perception of the situation is directly shaped by my conflict with them.

Once we see something from a particular point of view, it becomes difficult to see it any other way; i.e., we achieve "closure" in how we make sense of that experience. Our first perception of what has happened feels "right" and can lead us to seeing our perspective as the "good" one or better than others.



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Online training – are you ready for the new school year?

In 2023 SIA introduced a new service for our member districts called Public School Works (PSW), a learning management system that provides a variety of courses to ensure that your staff receives the required mandated trainings. This helpful resource:

- Saves time with efficient, automated course assignments and tracking;
- Can be used for annual notifications, acknowledgements and employee handbooks; and
- Can customize your district-specific videos and presentations.

Representatives from PSW are reaching out to our members to schedule the necessary trainings needed for the 2024/2025 school year. We encourage you to take advantage of this useful resource to meet your specific training requirements.

If you have any questions regarding SIA's support of this program, reach out to our Risk Management Department at (916) 364-1281.



Perception (continued from page 1)

Though it may be unconscious, this is why we often seek to make sure others hear our point of view first when a disagreement or conflict has occurred. If we do see someone we are in conflict with talking with someone else, we may think this other person has “taken sides” with them, even if in reality they’re not talking about us at all. This is where we get the saying, “The friend of my enemy is an enemy of mine.”

Perception also affects how individuals categorize information, leading to the formation of stereotypes and prejudices. As we pay attention to actions, events, etc., we fit them into categories that already make the most sense to us – those that are least “stressful” or don’t ask us to think outside of our current understanding. Furthermore, as conflict escalates, differences between others become more difficult to recognize (“If you’ve seen one, you’ve seen them all”) and each side of the conflict (group of friends, family, political opponents, etc.) may in turn expect or demand conformity in order to present a united front.

These cognitive shortcuts simplify complex social environments but may contribute to the development of negative attitudes toward others along with a sense of certainty about our own point of view, fueling mistrust, animosity and rigidity – each a factor in making the resolution of conflicts more difficult.

Prevention: The Power of Perceptual Awareness

Preventing conflicts requires a proactive approach to address underlying issues and manage potential sources of tension. A crucial aspect of this prevention is fostering perceptual awareness among individuals and groups. By promoting an understanding of how perceptions shape attitudes and behaviors, we can work to mitigate the risk of conflict.

Research shows that by exposing individuals to diverse perspectives and promoting empathy, stereotypes and prejudices that may contribute to conflict can be reduced. Additionally, conflict management training can equip individuals with the skills to navigate differences in perception, fostering open dialogue and better understanding.

Understanding the role of perception in conflict can help us understand how our actions may be perceived by others. Misunderstandings and misinterpretations can increase tensions, potentially making even our attempts to reduce conflict factor into their escalation. Utilizing skills that clarify the motivation and intentions behind our actions can prevent unnecessary conflict.

Resolution: Bridging Perceptual Gaps

Once conflicts emerge, addressing and resolving them necessitates an in-depth understanding of the perceptual



dynamics at play. Perceptions often shape the narratives that parties construct around the conflict, influencing their goals, strategies and willingness to engage in resolution processes.

Effective conflict resolution requires acknowledging and bridging perceptual gaps. Communication plays a central role in this regard, allowing parties to express their perspectives, clarify misunderstandings and find common ground. Mediation processes, facilitated by a trusted third party, can help identify shared interests and reshape perceptions, paving the way for mutually agreeable solutions. The conflict is not resolved by determining which perspective reflects the “truth” (as in a court of law), but rather, by recognizing that each perspective reflects only a part of the truth and must be considered in shaping a narrative of mutual understanding and recognition that leads to resolution.

Risk Reduction: Managing Unmanaged Conflict

Unmanaged conflicts pose significant risks to individuals, workplaces and communities. The failure to address conflicts effectively can lead to misunderstanding, dysfunction, inefficiency, poor morale and long-term instability. Understanding the role of perception is crucial for managing these risks and steering conflicts toward constructive outcomes.

One key aspect of risk reduction is early intervention based on an understanding of perceptual dynamics. Recognizing the signs of escalating conflict and addressing perceptual distortions in the early stages can prevent further polarization. Interventions that focus on altering negative perceptions and fostering empathy can be particularly effective in reducing the risk of unresolved conflict. In addition, training designed to develop communication and collaboration skills, put conflict resolution processes in place, and create cultural awareness can inform more effective strategies for conflict management.

Conclusion

The role of perception in conflict is complex and multifaceted, and its many social-psychological dynamics can come into play for the conflicts we experience. By understanding the impact of perception on conflicts both big and small, we can implement strategies for conflict prevention, resolution and risk reduction in our workplaces.



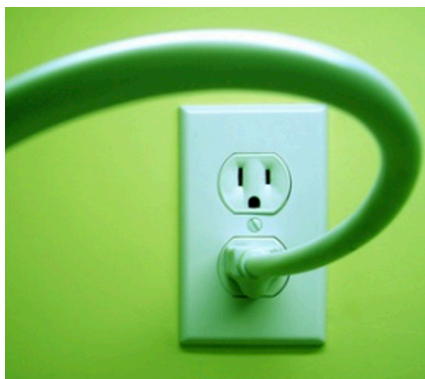
Electrical safety at your school should be a prime objective

May is National Electrical Safety Month

The improper use of electrical appliances can cause both physical injury and property damage. Paper overload, often found in our classrooms and offices, is just an electrical spark away from a fire.

Common electrical hazards found in our schools include:

- Damaged cords and outlets
- Extension cords “chained” together
- Outlets covered by paper
- Overloaded outlets and power strips
- Electrical ground connections removed from plugs
- Disconnecting computers improperly
- Electrical cords and appliances near sinks and other water sources
- Cords running under carpeting or rugs
- Electrical heaters under desks or near flammable materials



To protect your staff and your school property, take the following precautions:

- High amperage appliances such as refrigerators, space heaters and microwaves are to be plugged directly into outlets – never into power strips or extension cords.
- Take your time. Do not hurry a job without taking the proper precautions for working with electricity.
- Remind staff to report all damaged cords and outlets. Do not use these until repaired or replaced.
- Do not let cords hang. Properly secure cords to the wall.
- Never modify or remove a guard. Guards protect you from energized equipment parts.
- Know the location of the utility shut-off. Shut-off switches should be appropriately marked for easy recognition.
- Provide 36 inches of space in front of electrical panels for easy access. Don't cover panels with posters or other decorations.
- Be careful when moving any machinery with electrical cords.

SIA earns website accessibility certification

Amanda Franco, Prevention Services

In an era where inclusivity and accessibility are at the forefront of digital experiences, SIA is thrilled to announce that our website (www.sia-jpa.org) has been certified in the WCAG 2.1 Level A and AA standards. This [certification](#) was performed by WebAIM and awarded on November 28, 2023. [WCAG](#), or Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, were created to help companies ensure that people with disabilities can have equal access to website functionality, content and features. As SIA is committed to providing equal opportunities for all individuals, this certification is a significant step toward creating a more inclusive online environment.



By implementing accessibility features, we aim to provide a seamless browsing experience for all users. Here are some notable enhancements that have been made to our website:

- **Alternative Text for Images:** All images on our website now include descriptive alternative text, allowing screen readers to accurately convey the visual content to visually impaired users.
- **Keyboard Navigation:** We have optimized our website for keyboard-only navigation, enabling users who rely on alternative input devices to browse our site efficiently.
- **Color Contrast:** To improve readability, we have carefully selected color combinations that meet the WCAG 2.1 contrast requirements, ensuring that text and visual elements are easily distinguishable.
- **Clear and Consistent Layout:** Our website now follows a consistent structure throughout, making it easier for users to navigate and find the desired information effortlessly.

We understand that accessibility is an ongoing process and we're committed to continuously improving the usability of our website. If you encounter any accessibility barriers while using our platform or have suggestions for further enhancements, we encourage you to reach out to us. Your feedback is invaluable in our journey toward creating an inclusive online community.





SIA provides school risk management certification course to members



SIA continues to offer our member district staff the opportunity to increase their school risk management skills through the Certified School Risk Managers (CSRM) program. This year all classes

will be in person and held at the SIA office.

The five-class course provides participants with the in-depth knowledge, terminology and philosophy of the risk management process as it relates to schools. Participants will learn how to better protect their schools against unplanned losses while effectively maintaining budget integrity.

Upon completion of the five classes and successfully passing associated exams, participants will receive the CSRM designation. The CSRM coursework can be spread out over a period of three years and courses can be taken just for the educational benefits.

The fee for the classes is waived for SIA member district employees. You can [register for 2024 CSRM courses here](#).

The 2024 CSRM Schedule is as follows:

Fundamentals of Risk Management – May 16, 2024

Handling School Risks – June 27, 2024

Measuring School Risks – August 13, 2024

Funding School Risks – Sept 18, 2024

Administering School Risks – Oct 30, 2024

Your staff is responsible for reducing theft

Protecting your school's property is the responsibility of all school staff. Extra effort must be taken to reduce losses from theft. Here are some ways to do this:

- Lock your doors! Check the door when leaving to be sure it's firmly closed and locked.
- Check all windows and other points of entry for damage. Ensure they close securely.
- Keep track of keys. Don't give your assigned keys to anyone who's not authorized to have keys for that room, gate, storage area, gym, etc.
- Keep window coverings closed to hide room contents.
- Ensure that high-value rooms (i.e. computer and science labs) have secure windows and doors and are alarmed.
- Stencil or label school property with the site and district name. This includes PE equipment, tools, ladders, electronics, etc.
- Check to be sure your fire and intrusion alarms are working properly.
- Check the lighting on campus. Request repairs to lights that don't work. Consider installing motion sensors.
- Check fences and gates for damage.
- Get to know your neighbors and ask them to help keep an eye on your campus.
- Use automated phone calls or electronic messaging to your school families to ask them to report any unusual activity during off hours.



Free Virtual Trainings

SIA provides the staff of our member districts with virtual training on a variety of topics that apply to both personal and professional life. To learn more about upcoming training courses, visit the calendar on our website at www.sia-jpa.org.

QUOTE TO NOTE

"Leadership isn't a privilege to do less, it's a responsibility to do more."

– Kristen Hadeed

The material in this newsletter should be part of your Injury and Illness Prevention Plan (IIPP).

Keep a copy of this newsletter in your IIPP binder.

