

IELTS Reading Sample - Short Answer Questions

Organisational Conflict and Change

Change is a natural process. As humans, we are born, we grow, we mature, we decline, and we eventually die. On a bigger scale, modern existence is similarly in a constant state of flux, with global change, life strategic change, and personal change constantly upon us. With the current rate of technological advance, this is only happening at a faster pace. Putting it simply, life is changed, and in a manner never before experienced.

Organisations, also, are analogous to organisms. They similarly grow, mature, suffer injury and crises, and may well die (for example, become bankrupt). The implications of this new “change paradigm” are that the stable structures and static systems which in the past made organisations strong, now only contribute to their decline. Textbooks cite many examples of this: large monolithic institutions that failed to respond to external circumstances. Many were former government monopolies, and their break-up into smaller divisions was one attempt to deal with this issue. The message was clear: respond to change, or fail to thrive.

However, the big problem is that change promotes resistance among people. It brings a degree of discomfort, which in turn results in conflict. Thus, since change is constant, so too must be this conflict, and it is this which must be considered. The word “conflict” has negative connotations, and deservedly so. It is often the result of negative forces, producing negative results. Resources are diverted, judgements distorted, coordination reduced, and ill-feeling generated. It thus seems strange to argue that conflict is not necessarily unwelcome, and can, in fact, be necessary, yet that is exactly what I propose.

To understand this, we must first accept one crucial fact: in this new era of increasing change and complexity, accurate and considered decision-making is critical, and can no longer be considered the province of just one person. There is simply too much information to be processed, and too much knowledge needed, to be within the capability of single individuals. As a result, decision making in modern organisations is now based on group discussions, meetings, and presentations, all to allow the exchange of a variety of perspectives from appropriately qualified people.

The next fact that we must accept is that such gatherings are often affected by “groupthink.” This is when tightly-knit cohorts of workers uncritically accept the feelings of the group (rather than “lighting it out”). Individual dissent is squashed, leaving decision-making not as a product of a pool of thinking individuals, all with valuable insights, but merely a collective desire to promote harmony. Clearly, this is not a method likely to optimise the chances of making the best decision.

So, two facts, which when brought together lead to the interesting conclusion: that some degree of conflict is necessary in order to produce better decision-making and, ultimately, higher organisational performance. Extending this further, somewhat paradoxically, very low levels or an absence of conflict may actually be worrying, indicating a lack of staff

involvement or interest, or that problems are being hidden, new ideas stifled, and morale low. The focus thus shifts to conflict management (reducing conflict or creating it, as deemed optimum for the organisation), not conflict removal.

So, this is the contradiction. Change must happen, causing significant resistance and conflict, some of which is constructive and necessary, but some of which impedes progress. These feelings can originate from even the most level-headed, open-minded, and rational of people; thus, the next issue is how change agents can deal with it. One essential strategy is to listen to all those involved, even the angriest, most strident and difficult (since, after all, they may be right). Another strategy is to concur with what is factually accurate. People find it difficult to argue with those who agree with them, and this means resistance is reduced, communication enhanced, and insights into the situation will certainly come.

The third strategy for change agents is to always remind themselves of two basic facts. The first is not to expect complete rationality from those around them at all times. Expecting such ideal behaviour is itself irrational, and by resigning oneself to the inevitability of human failings, conflict can become more manageable. The other basic fact is that human beliefs are not necessarily encapsulations of the truth. Instead, they are often constructions of the mind, serving to maximise self-security. Thus, when encountering difficulties in implementing change, there is a good chance that the stakeholders are merely protecting such beliefs, and this should also be taken into account.

- The experienced change agent realises that everyone's perspective needs to be examined with an open mind. Conflicting viewpoints should be promoted in a healthy way, where people are disarmed and not reacting as a result of ill-feeling or malice. Yet, when such emotions emerge, the important point is to understand that it is not unnatural, and by understanding where it comes from and how to handle it, one can follow constructive, rather than destructive, paths. It is not easy, but it is certainly possible.

Questions 1-5

Answer the questions.

Choose **NO MORE THAN THREE WORDS** from the passage for each answer.

What can even rational people still produce when threatened with change?

1. _____

What sort of information should a change agent agree with?

2. _____

What quality does not constantly come from people?

3. _____

People often lie to enhance what feeling?

4. _____

What emotions can produce unhealthy conflict?

5. _____