

Joseph: You really made me angry when you flirted with other guys at the party last night.

Carmen: I'm surprised you could even see I was flirting, as much as you were drinking.

Joseph: Maybe I was drinking because my girlfriend was too busy dancing with other guys to pay any attention to me.

Carmen: Did it ever occur to you that maybe I'd pay more attention to you if you'd clean up your act? Why don't you get serious about graduate school and start acting responsibly?

Joseph: I'll do that right after you quit smoking and spend some time with me instead of always burying yourself in readings for your classes.

Carmen: You just say that because you're jealous that I'm in a graduate program and you're not.

Joseph: I wouldn't exactly call social work much of a graduate program.

Carmen: It's more than you have. At least I'm planning for a profession. Why don't you?

Joseph: You never do anything but complain, complain, complain. You really are a drag.

Carmen: It takes one to know one.

Joseph and Carmen have a problem, and it isn't just the issues they're discussing. Their larger problem is that they are not handling their conflict constructively. From previous chapters, we've learned enough to understand that negative communication fuels discord between people. For example, Joseph launched the conversation with *you* language. Instead of owning his anger, he blamed Carmen for it. In turn, she didn't own her anger. Joseph may also have misidentified what he was feeling. Is he really feeling angry at Carmen, or is he hurt or jealous that she spent more time with others than with him?

Both Joseph and Carmen disconfirmed the other with personal attacks. Furthermore, neither of them demonstrated dual perspective: Neither recognized and acknowledged the other's point of view. Each of them listened defensively and ambushed the other. Carmen and Joseph pursued their individual agendas and failed to connect with each other. As a result, Carmen and Joseph's argument hurts both of them and creates a defensive climate for their relationship. Let's start their conversation again, and see how positive communication might improve things.

Joseph: I felt hurt when you flirted with other guys at the party last night, and then I felt angry. [Joseph identifies hurt as the more basic feeling. He also owns his feelings.]

Carmen: I can understand that. I know you don't like me to pay attention to other men. [She acknowledges Joseph's feelings.] I got upset when you drank a lot, and I want you to understand how I feel about that. [Carmen owns her feelings and asserts her needs in the situation.]

Joseph: You're right about my drinking and your talking with other men. I know you hate it when I drink too much. [He acknowledges her concern.]

Carmen: Well, I guess neither of us was at our best last night. I was really tired, so I probably got more irritated than I usually would. [She shares responsibility for what happened.]

Joseph: And I've been feeling kind of down because you're so focused on your graduate program, and I can't seem to get started. [Because an affirming climate has been created, Joseph can disclose his deeper worries to Carmen.]

Carmen: I know you feel discouraged right now. [She again acknowledges his feelings.] I would too. [She shows empathy.] But you're so smart, and you'll do great once you settle on a course of action. [She confirms him by showing that she believes in him. She focuses their discussion on a single issue, which may allow them to address it effectively.] Why don't we put our heads together to sort through some of the options

and try to figure out how you can proceed? [She offers support and shows commitment to his welfare.]

Joseph: That would really help me. I just need to talk through a lot of possibilities. [He acknowledges her offer of help.] I'd really like to get your perspective on some ideas I've got. [He shows he values her viewpoint.]

Carmen: I've got all the time you want. [She confirms his value and her commitment to the relationship. Her comment also addresses Joseph's relationship-level concern that she may not want to spend time with him.]

Joseph: (smiling) Okay, and I promise I won't drink while we're talking. [He uses humor to restore a good climate. On the relationship level of meaning, he is asking, "Are we okay now?"]

Carmen: (smiling) And I promise I won't flirt with other guys while we're talking. [She reciprocates his relationship-level message by signaling that she, too, feels friendly again.]

The conflict proceeded very differently in the second instance. Both Carmen and Joseph used *I* language to own their emotions and each confirmed the other by acknowledging expressed feelings and concerns. The supportive climate they established enabled Joseph to reveal deeper worries that lay below his opening complaint about Carmen's flirting, and Carmen responded supportively to his disclosure. They also came up with a plan to address Joseph's worries. Especially important, they communicated effectively at the relationship level of meaning. Their relationship would be strengthened by how they managed their conflict in the second scenario.

Unlike Carmen and Joseph, we usually don't get a chance to go back and redo a conflict we've already had. Instead, we have to live with the consequences, which may be unpleasant. Because we usually don't get second chances with our conflicts, it's wise to learn how to manage conflict effectively the first time around.

There is no magic bullet for handling conflict constructively. However, communication is one of the most important influences on conflict and its effect on relationships. Research shows that communication problems contribute to dissatisfaction with relationships and to breakups (Dindia & Fitzpatrick, 1985). We also know that positive, supportive communication, including communication about differences, is one of the strongest influences on long-term satisfaction with relationships (Caughlin & Golish, 2002; Gottman & Silver, 2000).

In this chapter, we explore communicating about conflict in interpersonal relationships. We begin by defining conflict. Next, we consider principles of conflict to add depth to our understanding of it. Third, we discuss different ways to approach conflict. The fourth section of the chapter focuses on specific communication patterns that affect the process of conflict and its impact on individuals and relationships. We conclude by identifying guidelines for communicating effectively when engaging in conflict.

Defining Interpersonal Conflict

Interpersonal conflict exists when people in "I-You" or "I-Thou" relationships have different views, interests, or goals and feel a need to resolve those differences (Wilmot & Hocker, 2006). Let's look more closely at each part of this definition.

Expressed Disagreement

Interpersonal conflict is expressed disagreement, struggle, or discord. Thus, it is not conflict if we don't recognize disagreement or anger, or if we repress it so completely that it is not expressed directly or indirectly. Conflict exists only if disagreements or tensions are expressed.



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We express disagreement in various ways. Shooting daggers with your eyes nonverbally communicates anger and discord just as clearly as saying, "I'm angry with you." Walking out on a conversation and slamming the door both express hostility, as does refusing to talk to someone. Sometimes, we express disagreement overtly or directly, such as by saying, "I'm furious with you!" Other modes of communicating conflict are more covert or indirect, such as deliberately not answering the phone because you are angry with the caller. In each of these cases, people realize they are in conflict, and they express their conflict, although often in different ways.

Interdependence

Interpersonal conflict can occur only between people who perceive themselves as interdependent at the time of the conflict. Obviously, we are interdependent in I-Thou relationships with close friends, family members, and romantic partners. In addition, we may be temporarily interdependent with people in I-You relationships, which would include people we know only casually. For example, Russell and Brittany meet at a party and get into a boisterous argument over politics. Although they do not have a close relationship, during their conversation they do depend on each

other: Russell wants to persuade Brittany to his political views, and she wants to persuade him to hers. In that moment, they are interdependent because each wants to change the other's mind and that cannot happen without the other's cooperation. If Russell didn't have a desire to change what Brittany thinks, there would be no point in arguing with her. If Brittany didn't see a value in changing Russell's opinion, she wouldn't invest the effort in explaining her views or challenging his. Differences need not be resolved between people who don't affect each other. My colleagues and I have different food preferences but we don't experience conflict because we don't need to agree about food. Interpersonal conflict exists only when it is expressed by people who have some degree of interdependence at a particular time.

LENORE It's kind of strange, but you really don't fight with people who don't matter. With a lot of guys I dated, if I didn't like something they did, I'd just let it go because they weren't important enough for the hassle. But Rod and I argue a lot, because we do affect each other. Maybe fighting is a sign that people care about each other. If you don't, why bother?

The Felt Need for Resolution

Conflict is more than just having differences. We differ with people about many things, but this doesn't invariably lead to conflict. For example, my in-laws don't like large dogs, and we don't like small ones; my best friend likes very bright paint on walls in her

home, and I prefer more neutral tones in my home. These differences don't spark conflict: My in-laws tolerate our Shepherd mix, and we accept their Boston terrier. As my friend and I don't live together, we don't have to agree on what color to paint the walls. In these cases, differences don't result in conflict. Conflict involves tensions between goals, preferences, or decisions that we feel we need to reconcile. In other words, conflict involves two perceptions: the perception that our concerns are at odds with those of another person, and the perception that we and that other person must resolve our differences.

Principles of Conflict

Many people view conflict as inherently negative (Turner & Shutter, 2004), but that is a misunderstanding. To address this misunderstanding as well as others, we discuss five principles of conflict.

Principle 1: Conflict Is Natural in Most Western Relationships

In most Western relationships conflict is a normal, inevitable part of relating. When people matter to each other and affect each other, disagreements are unavoidable. You like to work alone, and your coworkers like to interact in teams. You think money should be enjoyed, and your partner believes in saving for a rainy day. You want to move to a place where there's a great job for you, but the location has no career prospects for your partner. Again and again, we find ourselves at odds with people who matter to us. When this happens, we have to resolve the differences, preferably in a way that doesn't harm the relationship.

The presence of conflict does not indicate that a relationship is unhealthy or in trouble, although how partners manage conflict does influence relational health (Wilmot & Hocker, 2006). Actually, engaging in conflict indicates that people are involved with each other. If they weren't, there would be no need to resolve differences. This is a good point to keep in mind when conflicts arise, because it reminds us that a strong connection underlies even disagreement.

RON It sounds funny, but the biggest thing my fiancée and I fight about is whether it's okay to fight. I was brought up not to argue and to think that conflict is bad. In her family, people did argue a lot, and she thinks it is healthy. What I'm coming to realize is that there is a lot of conflict in my family, but it's hidden, so it never gets dealt with very well. I've seen her and her parents really go at it, but I have to admit they work through their differences, and people in my family don't.

Most of us have attitudes about conflict that reflect scripts we learned in our families. Like Ron, some of us were taught that conflict is bad and should be avoided, whereas others learned that airing differences is healthy. Because conflict is inevitable in interpersonal relationships, we should develop constructive ways to deal with it.

Principle 2: Conflict May Be Expressed Overtly or Covertly

When we defined conflict, we noted that disagreement can be expressed either overtly or covertly. Overt conflict is out in the open and explicit. It exists when people deal with their differences in a direct, straightforward manner. They might calmly discuss their

To consider the conflict scripts you learned in your family, complete the Everyday Applications activity "Understanding Your Conflict Script" at the end of this chapter.

Yet, conflict isn't always overt. When angry, a person may deliberately do something to hurt or upset another person. Andy spends half the day surfing the net. Knowing that Elliott hates to be kept waiting, his wife intentionally arrives 20 minutes late for a dinner date because he chose a restaurant she doesn't like. These people are expressing their anger indirectly, and the conflict is covert.

Much covert conflict takes place through **games**, highly patterned interactions in which the conflicts are hidden or denied and a counterfeit excuse is created for argument. These games involve cooperation between players.

right. Her anger or resentment is expressed indirectly.

"Mine Is Worse Than Yours" is another commonly played game. Suppose you tell a friend that you have two tests and a paper due next week, and your friend says, "You think *that's* bad? Listen to this: I have two tests, three papers, and an oral report all due in the next two weeks!" Your friend expressed no concern for your plight; rather, she told you that her situation is worse. In this game, people try to monopolize rather than listen and respond to each other.

"Yes, But" is a game in which a person pretends to be asking for help, but then refuses all help that's offered. Doing this allows the person who initiates the game to attempt to make the other person feel inadequate for being unable to help. Lorna asks her boyfriend to help her figure out how to better manage her money. When he suggests

Games and passive aggression are dishonest, ineffective ways to manage conflict. They are dishonest because they camouflage the real issues. They are ineffective because, as long as conflict remains hidden or disguised, it's almost impossible for people to recognize and resolve it.

Our cultural membership and socialization in particular social communities affect how we view and respond to conflict.

tures avoid it (Martin & Nakayama, 2007). Many Asian cultures adopt the view that conflict is destructive. Yan Bing Zhang, Jake Harwood, and Mary Hummert (2005) asked Chinese adults to evaluate transcripts in which an older worker criticized a younger worker. Older participants favored an accommodating style. Younger adults preferred a problem-solving style (assertive and cooperative) to an accommodating style (emphasizes relational harmony) or perceived the two styles as equally desirable. Older and younger participants alike had less positive perceptions of the avoiding style, which was perceived as disrespectful of others, and the competing (driven by self-interest) style of dealing with conflict. In contrast, many Westerners prefer the competing style (Bergstrom & Nussbaum, 1996).

VALAYA One of the hardest adjustments for me has been how Americans assert themselves. I was very surprised that students argue with their teachers. We would never do that in Taiwan. It would be extremely disrespectful. I also see friends argue, sometimes very much. I understand this is a cultural difference, but I have trouble accepting it. I learned that disagreements hurt relationships.

To apply what you've read about covert conflict to your own life, complete the Everyday Applications activity "Identifying Games in Your Communication" at the end of this chapter.

Differences among Social Communities Our orientations toward conflict are influenced not only by culture but also by social communities. Specific communities such as Amish and Quakers within Western culture regard conflict as harmful. In addition, gender, sexual orientation, and race/ethnicity may influence orientations toward conflict. There are some general differences in how women and men respond to conflict, although the generalizations don't apply to all women and men (Stafford, Dutton, & Haas, 2000; Wood, 2011a). In general, women are more likely to want to discuss conflict, whereas many men tend to avoid or minimize conflict. Women are also more likely than men to defer and compromise, both of which reflect gendered prescriptions for women to accommodate others (Stafford et al., 2000).

Masculine socialization places less emphasis on expressive communication. In professional situations and athletics, men may be very vocal in dealing with conflict. Yet, in their personal lives, men often deny or minimize problems rather than deal openly with them. Long-term studies of marriage indicate that husbands are more inclined than wives to withdraw from conflict, and that stonewalling by husbands is a strong predictor of divorce (Bass, 1993).

NICK My girlfriend drives me crazy. Any time the slightest thing is wrong in our relationship, she wants to have a long, drawn-out analysis of it. I just don't want to spend all that time dissecting the relationship.

GINA My boyfriend is a world-class avoider. When something is wrong between us, I naturally want to talk about it and get things right again. But he will evade, tell me everything's fine when it's not, say the problem is too minor to talk about, and use any other tactic he can come up with to avoid facing the problem. He thinks if you don't deal with problems, they somehow solve themselves.

Men are more likely than women to use coercive tactics, both verbal and physical, to avoid discussing problems and to force their resolutions on others (Johnson, 2006; Snell, Hawkins, & Belk, 1988; White, 1989). Yet dominating styles of handling conflict are associated with relationship dissatisfaction (Zacchilli, Hendrick, & Hendrick, 2009).

Before leaving our discussion of gender, we should note one other important finding. Psychologist John Gottman (1993; Jacobson & Gottman, 1998) reports that, in general, men experience greater and longer-lasting physical responses to interpersonal conflict than women do. Compared with women, during conflict men's heart rates rise more quickly and to higher levels and stay elevated for a longer period of time. Because conflict tends to be more physically and psychologically painful to men than to women, men may be motivated to deny, avoid, or minimize issues that could cause conflict.

Sexual orientation doesn't seem to be a major influence on how people see and deal with conflict. Caryl Rusbult and her colleagues (Rusbult, Johnson, & Morrow, 1986a; Rusbult, Zembrodt, & Iwaniszek, 1986b; Wood, 1986, 1994b) report that, in their responses to conflict, gay men are much like heterosexual men, and lesbians are similar to heterosexual women. Most children, regardless of sexual orientation, are socialized on the basis of their sex. Thus, boys, both gay and heterosexual, tend to learn masculine orientations toward interaction, whereas lesbian and heterosexual girls are socialized toward feminine styles of interaction.

Research indicates that race-ethnicity is related to conflict styles and to interpretations of them. Terri Orbuch and Joseph Veroff and their colleagues (Orbuch & Eyster, 1997; Orbuch, Veroff, & Hunter, 1999) report that open, verbal arguing is more often

destructive for white couples than black couples. They also report that black wives are more likely than white wives to believe that airing conflicts can lead to positive resolution.

Principle 4: Conflict Can Be Managed Well or Poorly

People respond to conflict in a variety of ways, from physical attack to verbal aggression to collaborative problem solving. Although each method may resolve differences, some are clearly preferable to others. Depending on how we handle disagreements, conflict can either promote continuing closeness or tear a relationship apart.

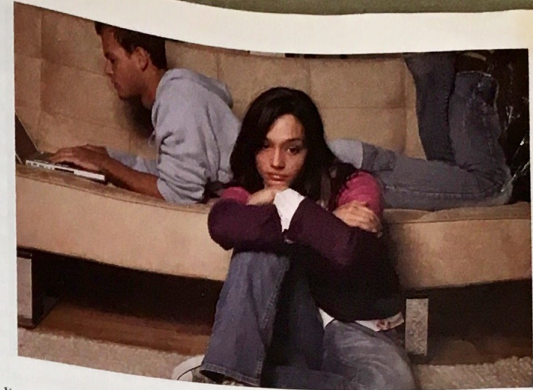
One of the main reasons conflict is handled poorly is that it often involves intense feelings, which many people do not know how to identify or express. We may feel deep disappointment, resentment, or anger toward someone we care about, and this is difficult to manage. Our discussion in Chapter 7 should help you identify your feelings and choose effective ways to communicate your emotions in conflict situations. Other skills we've discussed—such as using *I* language and monitoring the self-serving bias—will also help you manage the feelings that often accompany conflict.

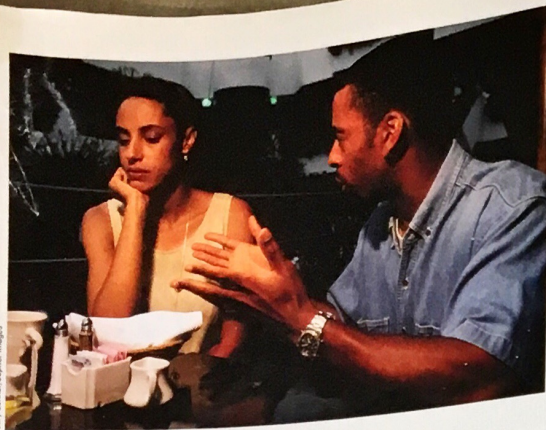
Principle 5: Conflict Can Be Good for Individuals and Relationships

Although we tend to think of conflict negatively, it can be beneficial in a number of ways (Parker-Pope, 2010a). When managed constructively, conflict provides opportunities for us to grow as individuals and to strengthen our relationships. We deepen insight into our ideas and feelings when we express them and get responses from others. Conflict also allows us to consider points of view different from our own. Based on what we learn, we may change our own views.

HERBERT It helped me get my own thoughts together about the primary to talk with friends. From the start, I was on Obama's team, but my closest buddy just didn't like Obama. At first, we yelled a lot, but then we settled down and really talked. I began to understand why he thought Obama was an elitist, and he began to see why I didn't. He thought Obama didn't have the experience that Clinton did, and I thought Obama's judgment and philosophy trumped experience. Both of us learned from the other by really talking and listening, especially the listening part.

Conflict can also enhance relationships by enlarging partners' understandings of one another. What begins as a discussion of a particular issue usually winds up providing broader information about why partners feel as they do and what meanings they attach to the issue. In the example that opened this chapter, the original complaint about Carmen's





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flirting led to the discovery that Joseph felt insecure about his identity and Carmen's respect for him because she was succeeding in graduate work, and he wasn't advancing in school or a career. Once his concern emerged, the couple could address deeper issues in their relationship.

Lack of conflict isn't necessarily a symptom of a healthy relationship (Arnett, 1986; Parker-Pope, 2010a). Low levels of conflict could reflect limited emotional depth between partners or unwillingness to engage in communication about differences. Researchers

report that there is no direct association between marital happiness and the number of arguments that spouses have (Gottman & Gottman, 2007; Muehlhoff & Wood, 2002; Wilmut & Hocker, 2006). Instead, the key is to have a greater number of positive, affirming interactions than negative ones. One group of researchers refers to this as "keeping a positive balance in the marital bank account" (Gottman & Silver, 2000).

JANA Geoff and I have a pretty intense relationship. We fight a lot, and we fight hard. Some of my friends think this is bad, but we don't. Nothing is swept under the carpet in our relationship. If either of us is angry or upset about something, we hash it out then and there. But we are just as intense in positive ways. Geoff lets me know all the time that he loves me, and I am always hugging and kissing him. I guess you could just say our relationship is passionate—in bad moments and good ones.

To review, we've discussed five principles of interpersonal conflict. First, we noted that conflict is both natural and inevitable in most Western interpersonal relationships. Second, we discovered that conflict can be directly communicated or covertly expressed through indirect communication or games that camouflage real issues. Third, we saw that conflict styles and meanings are shaped by social location—membership in cultures and social communities. Fourth, we emphasized that how we manage conflict influences its resolution and its impact on interpersonal climates. Finally, we saw that conflict can be constructive for individuals and relationships. We can now build on these principles by discussing diverse ways that people approach and respond to conflict.

Orientations to Conflict

We've noted that conflict can be managed in various ways, some more effective than others. We now look at three basic orientations that affect how we approach conflict situations. In the next section of the chapter, we'll see how these different approaches shape our patterns of communicating during conflict. Each way of approaching conflict is appropriate in some relationships and situations; the challenge is to know when a particular approach is constructive.

Lose-Lose

A **lose-lose** orientation assumes that conflict results in losses for everyone and that it is unhealthy and destructive for relationships. A wife might feel that conflicts about money hurt her, her husband, and the marriage. Similarly, a person may refrain from arguing with a friend, believing the result would be wounded pride for both of them. Because the lose-lose orientation assumes that conflict is inevitably negative, people who adopt it typically try to avoid conflict at all costs. Yet seeking to avoid conflict at all costs may be very costly indeed. We may have to defer our own needs or rights, and we may feel unable to give honest feedback to others.

THEO I hate to fight with friends. I do just about anything to avoid an argument. But sometimes, what I have to do is sacrifice my preferences or even my rights just to avoid conflict. And sometimes, I have to go along with something I don't believe in or think is right. I'm starting to think that maybe conflict would be better than avoiding it—at least in some cases.

Although the lose-lose orientation is not usually beneficial in dealing with conflicts in close relationships, it has merit in some circumstances. Some issues—for example, where to go for dinner—aren't worth the energy and the discomfort that conflict arouses. In other cases, the potential consequences of conflict—being fired from a job, for instance—may be too great (Caughlin & Arr, 2004).

Win-Lose

Win-lose orientations assume that one person wins at the expense of the other. A person who sees conflict as a win-lose matter thinks that disagreements are battles that can have only one victor. What one person gains, the other loses; what one person loses, the other gains. Disagreements are seen as zero-sum games in which there is no possibility for everyone to benefit. The win-lose orientation is cultivated in cultures that place value on individualism, self-assertion, and competition. If you guessed that the United States emphasizes those values, you're right. A win-lose approach to conflict is not common in cultures that place priority on cooperation, keeping others from failing, and finding areas of agreement.

Partners who disagree about whether to move to a new location might adopt a win-lose orientation. In turn, this would lock them into a yes-no view in which only two alternatives are seen: move or stay put. The win-lose orientation almost guarantees that the partners won't work to find or create a mutually acceptable solution, such as moving to a third place that meets both partners' needs, or having a long-distance relationship so that each person can have the best location. The more person A argues for moving, the more person B argues for not moving. Eventually one of them "wins," but at the cost of the other and the relationship. A win-lose orientation toward conflict tends to undermine relationships because someone has to lose.

There are other potential disadvantages to a win-lose approach to conflict. The person who loses may assume the role of martyr, which often fuels resentment and dissatisfaction in the person playing martyr and frustration and anger in those around him or her (Wilmut & Hocker, 2006). Also, the person who loses may feel a need to "get even" by winning the



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The differences between Japanese and American views of conflict shape specific communication patterns during business negotiations (McDaniel & Quasha, 2000; Weiss, 1987). Consider how each of the following negotiation strategies reflects values typical of Japanese or American society.

Japanese Style

- Understate your own initial position or state it vaguely to allow the other room to state his or her position.
- Find informal ways to let the other person know your bottom line to move the agreement forward without directly confronting the other with your bottom line.
- Look for areas of agreement, and focus talk on them.
- Avoid confrontation or explicit disagreement.
- Work to make sure that neither you nor the other person fails.
- Plan to spend a long time discussing issues before even moving toward a decision.

American Style

- Overstate initial position to establish a strong image.
- Keep your bottom line secret from the other person to preserve your power and gain the most.
- Where there are differences, assert your position and attempt to win the other's assent.
- Be adversarial.
- Work to win all you can.
- Push to reach decisions as rapidly as possible.



tion, respect, and love between marital partners (Zacchilli, et al., 2009). When partners adopt win-win views of conflict, they often discover solutions that neither had thought of previously. This happens because they are committed to their own and the other's satisfaction. Sometimes, win-win attitudes result in compromises that satisfy enough of each person's needs to provide confirmation and to protect the health of the relationship.

In Chapter 3, we learned that how we perceive things has a powerful impact on what they mean to us and on the possibilities of resolution that we imagine. Remember how you couldn't solve the nine dots problem in Chapter 3 if you perceived it as a square? In a similar way, we're unlikely to find a win-win solution if we perceive conflict as win-lose or lose-lose.

Responses to Conflict

HANK One thing I learned when I was serving in the military is that a fist will stop an argument a lot faster than words. You can talk all day long and never reach resolution, but a good pop in the face ends conflict real fast.

next argument—which ensures that a sharp win-lose orientation will be present then, too (Meyer, 2004; Olson & Braithwaite, 2004).

A win-lose approach can be appropriate when we have a high desire for our position to prevail, low commitment to a relationship, and little desire to take care of the person with whom we disagree. When you're buying a car, for instance, you want the best deal you can get, and you probably have little concern for the dealer's profit and little commitment to caring for the salesperson.

Win-Win

Win-win orientations assume that there are usually ways to resolve differences so that everyone gains. A good solution is one that everyone finds satisfactory. When all people are committed to finding a mutually acceptable solution, a win-win resolution is possible. Sometimes, people can't find or create a solution that is each person's ideal. In such cases, each person may make some accommodations to build a solution that is acceptable to each person. Compromising to find a solution that is acceptable to both parties is positively associated with satisfac-

Hank is correct that physical violence can sometimes stop an argument—at least temporarily. Physical force may be an unfortunate necessity in some situations, such as combat or self-protection. In interpersonal relationships, however, it is a very poor way to deal with conflict. A great deal of research demonstrates that violence in families harms both perpetrators and victims, and it violates the trust upon which close relationships are built (Jacobson & Gottman, 1998; Johnson, 2006). In Chapter 11, we'll look more closely at the dynamics of violence between intimate partners. In this section, we'll consider ways of responding to conflict other than violence.

Our approach to conflict shapes how we respond when conflict occurs. A series of studies identified four distinct ways North Americans respond to relational distress (Rusbult, 1987; Rusbult, Zembrodt, & Iwaniszek, 1986b). These are represented in Figure 9.1. According to this model, responses to conflict can be either active or passive, depending on how overtly they address prob-

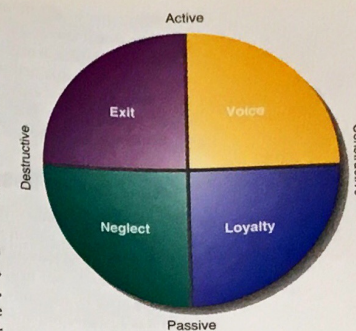


FIGURE 9.1
Responses to Conflict
Cengage Learning

The Exit Response

The **exit response** involves physically walking out or psychologically withdrawing. Refusing to talk about a problem is an example of psychological exit. Ending a relationship, or leaving when conflict arises are both examples of literal exit. Because exit doesn't address problems, it tends to be destructive. Because exit doesn't

LESLIE A friend of mine uses the exit strategy on e-mail. Whenever we get into an argument, she stops replying to my e-mail messages. I know she reads them, because she's on e-mail several times every day. But if we're having an argument, she just won't reply. It's like she's not there, and I can't make her talk to me.

Exit responses are associated with lose-lose and win-lose orientations toward conflict. People who have a lose-lose orientation assume that nobody can benefit if conflict takes place, so they see no point in engaging in conflict and prefer to avoid it. For different reasons, the win-lose orientation may promote the exit response. People who see conflicts as win-lose situations may exit physically or psychologically if they think they are losing an argument. Refusing to engage disagreement is generally associated with relationship dissatisfaction (Caughlin & Golish, 2002; Overall, Sibley, & Travaglia, 2010).

The Neglect Response

The **neglect response** denies or minimizes problems, disagreements, anger, tension, or other matters that could lead to overt conflict. People engaging in neglect say, "There isn't a disagreement here," "You're creating a problem where none exists," or "You're making a mountain out of a molehill." These statements deny that a problem exists or that a problem is important. Neglect generally is destructive because it doesn't resolve tension. It is passive because it avoids discussion (Overall, et al., 2010). In some situations, however,

Everyday Application

Learn about your own conflict orientations by completing the Everyday Applications activity "Identifying Your Conflict Orientations" at the end of this chapter.

neglect may be an effective response to conflict. For instance, if an issue can't be resolved, discussing it may further harm a relationship. Also, if a conflict isn't important to a relationship's health, it may be appropriate not to deal with it.

The lose-lose and win-lose orientations may prompt the neglect response for the same reasons that each of those orientations is associated with the exit response. Either the person thinks that escalating the disagreement will harm everyone, or the person thinks that she or he will lose if the conflict is allowed to progress.

The Loyalty Response

The **loyalty response** involves staying committed to a relationship despite differences. In other words, the person who adopts loyalty as a response to conflict decides to stay in a relationship and tolerate the differences. Loyalty may be desirable if tolerating differences isn't too costly, but in some instances deferring your own needs and goals may be too high a price for harmony. Loyalty is silent allegiance that doesn't actively address conflict, so it is a passive response. Because it preserves the relationship, loyalty may be constructive, at least in the short term. This response, however, has the potential to result in the silently loyal partner feeling unappreciated (Overall, et al., 2010).

Loyalty is most likely to spring from a lose-lose orientation toward conflict. Believing that engaging in overt disagreement only hurts everyone, people may choose to remain loyal to the relationship and not try to work through differences.

ZONDOMINI In South Africa, the tradition is for women not to speak out against their husbands. Women are supposed to support whatever the husband says or does. A woman who speaks out or who disagrees with her husband or any male relative is considered bad; she is behaving inappropriately. But some of us are now challenging this custom. I disagreed with my father about my marriage, and he did not speak to me for many months after. Now he speaks to me again. I also sometimes disagree with my husband. Life is changing in South Africa.

The Voice Response

Finally, the **voice response** addresses conflict directly and attempts to resolve it. People who respond with voice identify problems or tensions and assert a desire to deal with them. Voice implies that people care enough about a relationship to notice when something is wrong and do something to improve the situation. Thus, voice is generally the most constructive way to deal with conflict in intimate relationships (Overall, et al., 2010).

The voice response is most likely to be fostered by a win-win orientation toward conflict. It takes belief in yourself and in the other person to give voice to problems and disagreements. Voicing concerns also expresses belief in the relationship. We're unlikely to voice disagreements unless we believe that a relationship can withstand our doing so. Voice may also take the form of genuine apology for behavior that has hurt another, or explicit acceptance of a partner's apology (Fincham & Beach, 2002; Vangelisti & Crumley, 1998).

Although each of us has developed a preferred response, we can become skillful in other responses if we so choose. Constructive strategies (voice and loyalty) are advisable for relationships that matter to you and that you want to maintain. Exit may be useful as an interim strategy when partners need time to reflect or cool off before dealing with conflict directly. Loyalty may be appropriate in situations where conflict is temporary and provoked by external pressures. Developing skill in a range of responses to conflict increases your ability to communicate sensitively and effectively.

Everyday Application

Increase your skill in addressing conflict by completing the Everyday Applications activity "Enlarging Your Repertoire of Responses to Conflict" at the end of this chapter.

Communication Patterns during Conflict

Communication skills shape the process and outcomes of conflict. Thus, we want to understand specific kinds of communication that foster or impede effective conflict.

Unproductive Conflict Communication

Ineffective communication can hurt individuals, damage relationships, and undermine the possibility of resolving problems. Unproductive communication patterns in managing conflict reflect a preoccupation with oneself and a disregard for the other. As a result, communication tends to be negative. Table 9.1 identifies behaviors that foster constructive and unproductive conflict communication (Gottman, 1993; Gottman, Notarius, Gonso, & Markman, 1976; Houts, Barnett-Walker, Paley, & Cox, 2008; Vangelisti, 1993).

The Early Stages The first three minutes of an argument may be the most important because they tend to set the stage for how conflict will be managed (Parker, 2010a). The foundation of unproductive conflict is established by communication that fails to confirm individuals. If John says, "I want us to spend more time together," Shannon may reply, "That's unreasonable." This disconfirms John's feeling and request. Shannon could also disconfirm him by not replying at all, which would be a refusal to acknowledge him. During the early stages of conflict, people tend to listen poorly. They may listen selectively, taking in only what they expect or want to believe. They may communicate disdain nonverbally. For instance, Shannon could roll her eyes to communicate a signal that she doesn't care what he wants.

Cross-complaining occurs when one person's complaint is met by a countercomplaint. Shannon could respond to John's request for more time by saying, "Yeah, well, what I want is a little more respect for what I do." That response doesn't address John's concern; instead it is an attempt to divert the conversation and to switch the fault from Shannon to John. Poor listening and disconfirmation establish a climate in which dual perspective is low and defensiveness is high.

Table 9.1 Summary of Constructive and Unproductive Communication

Validation of each other	Disconfirmation of each other
Sensitive listening	Poor listening
Dual perspective	Preoccupation with self
Expressed support of each other	Not supporting, or undercutting, each other
Recognition of other's concerns	Cross-complaining
Asking for clarification	Hostile mind reading
Infrequent interruptions	Frequent interruptions
Focus on specific issues	Kitchen-sinking
Compromises and contracts	Counterproposals
Useful metacommunication	Excessive metacommunication
Summarizing the concerns	Self-summarizing by both partners
Positive affect	Negative affect



Low angle Susan Stock

Negative climates tend to build on themselves. As parties in conflict continue to talk, mind reading is likely. Instead of offering an explicit apology, John assumes that Shannon knows he is sorry (Vangelisti & Crumley, 1998). Instead of asking John to clarify or explain his feelings, Shannon assumes she knows his motives. Perhaps she thinks he wants to distract her from her work so that she won't succeed. If Shannon makes this assumption, she discounts what John wants. Mind reading in distressed relationships has a distinctly negative tone. The negative assumptions and attributions reflect and fuel hostility and mistrust.

The Middle Stages Once a negative climate has been set, it is stoked by other unconstructive communication. People often engage in **kitchen-sinking**, in which everything except the kitchen sink is thrown into the argument. John may add to his original complaint by recalling all sorts of other real and imagined slights from Shannon. She may reciprocate by hauling out her own laundry list of gripes. The result is such a mass of grievances that John and Shannon are overwhelmed. They can't solve all the problems they've dragged into the discussion, and they may well forget what the original issue was. Kitchen-sinking is particularly likely to occur when people have a host of concerns they've repressed for some time. Once a conflict begins, everything that has been stored up is thrown in.

The middle stages of unproductive conflict tend to be marked by frequent interruptions that disrupt the flow of talk. Interruptions may also be attempts to derail a partner's issues and reroute discussion: "I'm not going to work on spending more time together until we discuss your responsibility for this house." Cross-complaining often continues in this middle stage of the syndrome. Because neither person is allowed to develop thoughts fully (or even to finish a sentence), discussion never focuses on any one topic long enough to make headway in resolving it.

The Later Stages Even if people make little progress in solving their problems, limited time and energy guarantee an end to an episode of conflict. Unfortunately, the preceding stages didn't lay the proper groundwork for an effective discussion of solutions. As a result, each person's proposals tend to be met with counterproposals. The self-preoccupation that first surfaced in the early phase persists now, so each person is more interested in pushing his or her solution than in considering the other person's. John proposes, "Maybe we could spend two nights together each week." Shannon counterproposes, "Maybe you could assume responsibility for half the chores around here." Her counterproposal fails to acknowledge his suggestion, so her communication does not confirm him. Compounding self-preoccupation is self-summarizing, which occurs when a person keeps repeating what she or he has already said. This egocentric communication ignores the other person and simply restates the speaker's feelings and perspective.

Excessive metacommunication is a final form of negative communication in unproductive conflict. Metacommunication, which we discussed in Chapter 1, is communication about communication. For example, John might say, "I think we're avoiding

talking about the real issue here." This is a comment about the communication that is happening. Metacommunication is used by couples in both unproductive conflict and constructive conflict, but it is used in very different ways (Gottman, Notarius, Gonso, & Markman, 1976; Gottman et al., 1977).

In constructive conflict communication, people use metacommunication to keep the discussion on track, and then they return to the topics at hand. For instance, during a disagreement, Aaron might comment that Norma doesn't seem to be expressing her feelings and invite her to do so. Then, he and Norma would return to their discussion.

In contrast, people who manage conflict unproductively often become embroiled in metacommunication and can't get back to the issues. For example, Norma and Aaron might get into extended metacommunication about the way they deal with conflict and never return to the original topic of conflict. Excessive metacommunication is more likely to block partners than to resolve tensions satisfactorily.

The communication that makes up the unproductive conflict reflects and promotes egocentrism and dogmatism, which is rigid thinking, because negative communication tends to be self-perpetuating. This, in turn, can trigger a domino effect of negative out-comes: Egocentrism leads to poor listening, which promotes disconfirmation, which fuels defensiveness, which stokes dogmatism, which leads to hostile mind reading and kitchen-sinking, which pave the way for self-summarizing. Each negative form of communication feeds into the overall negative system. Unproductive communication fosters a defensive, negative climate, which makes it almost impossible to resolve conflicts, confirm individuals, or nurture a relationship.

Constructive Conflict Communication

Constructive communication during conflict creates a supportive, positive climate that increases the possibility of resolving differences without harming the relationship. Let's look at how constructive communication plays out in the three phases of conflict.

The Early Stages The foundation of constructive management of conflict is established long before a specific disagreement is aired. Climate, which is the foundation both of conflict and of the overall relationship, sets the tone for communication during conflict.

Once an argument is starting, it's critical to start it productively. Remember what we noted when discussing unproductive conflict: The first three minutes of an argument may be the most important because they establish the foundation for what will follow (Parker-Pope, 2010a). To establish a good climate, communicators confirm each other by recognizing and acknowledging each other's concerns and feelings. Returning to our example, when John says, "I want us to spend more time together," Shannon could confirm him by replying, "I wish we could, too. It's nice that you want us to have more time together." Shannon's statement communicates to John that she is listening and that she cares about his concerns and shares them. After she says that, their discussion might go like this:

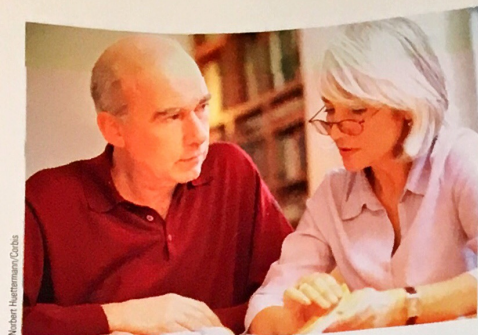
John: Yeah, it just seems that we used to spend a lot more time together, and we felt closer then. I miss that.

Shannon: I do, too. It sounds as if what's really on your mind is how close we are, not specifically the amount of time we spend together. Is that right?

John: Yeah, I guess that is more what's bothering me, but I kind of think they're connected, don't you?

Shannon: To an extent, but we won't feel closer just by spending more time together. I think we also need some shared interests like we used to have.

John: I'd like that. Do you have any ideas?



Robert Hartmann/Corbis

Let's highlight several things in this conversation. First, notice that, when Shannon responds directly to John's opening statement, he elaborates and clarifies what is troubling him. Instead of time per se, the issue is closeness. Listening sensitively, Shannon picks up on this and refocuses their conversation on closeness. We should also notice that Shannon doesn't mind read; instead, she asks John whether she has understood what he meant. When he asks Shannon whether she thinks time and closeness are related, John shows openness to her perceptions; thus, he confirms her and doesn't mind read. The openness they create clears the way for effective discussion of how to increase

their closeness. Once a supportive climate is established, the couple can proceed to the middle stages of conflict knowing they are not fighting each other but working together to solve a problem.

The Middle Stages The positive groundwork laid in the early phase of conflict supports what happens as people dig into issues. The middle stages of constructive conflict are marked by what Gottman (1993) calls *agenda building*, which involves staying focused on the main issues. When partners keep communication on target, kitchen-sinking is unlikely to derail discussion.

Side issues may come up, as they do in unproductive conflict, but people who have learned to communicate effectively control digressions and stay with their agenda. One useful technique is **bracketing**, which is noting that an issue arising in the course of conflict should be discussed later. Bracketing allows partners to confirm each other's concerns by agreeing to deal with them later. In addition, bracketing topics peripheral to the current discussion allows partners to make progress in resolving the immediate issue. To bracket a topic, a person might say, "That's an important point, and we need to discuss it. If we deal with it now, we won't be able to stay focused on what we're discussing now. Could we agree to come back to this later?"

During the middle stage of constructive conflict, communicators continue to show respect for each other by not interrupting except to get clarification ("Before you go on, could you explain what you mean by closeness?") or to check perceptions ("So you think time together leads to closeness?"). Unlike disruptive interruptions, those that clarify ideas and check perceptions confirm the person speaking by showing that the listener wants to understand the meaning.

Parties in conflict continue to recognize and acknowledge each other's point of view. Rather than cross-complaining, they acknowledge each other's feelings, thoughts, and concerns. This doesn't mean they don't put their own concerns on the table. Constructive conflict includes asserting our own feelings and needs as part of an honest dialogue. Honoring both others and ourselves is central to good interpersonal communication.

The Later Stages In the culminating phase, attention shifts to resolving the tension. Whereas in unproductive conflict this involves meeting proposals with counterproposals, in constructive conflict people continue to collaborate.

Keeping in mind that they share a relationship, they continue using dual perspective to remain aware of each other's viewpoints. Instead of countering each other's proposals,

they engage in **contracting**, which is building a solution through negotiation and the acceptance of parts of proposals. The difference between counterproposals and contracting is illustrated in this example:

Counterproposals

John: I want us to spend 3 nights a week doing things together.

Shannon: I can't do that right now because we're short-handed at work, and I am filling in nights. Get a hobby so you aren't bored nights.

John: Not being bored isn't the same as our being close. I want us to spend time together again.

Shannon: I told you, I can't do that. Don't be so selfish.

John: Aren't we as important as your job?

Shannon: That's a stupid question. I can't take 3 nights off. Let's take more vacations.

Contracting

John: I want us to spend 3 nights a week doing things together.

Shannon: I'm all for that, but right now we're short-handed at work. How about if we use your idea but adjust it to my job? Maybe we could start with 1 night each week and expand that later.

John: Okay, that's a start, but could we also reserve some weekend time for us?

Shannon: That's a good idea. Let's plan on that. I just can't be sure how much I'll have to work on weekends until we hire some new people. What if we promise to give ourselves an extra week's vacation to spend together when my office is back at full staff?

John: Okay, that's a good backup plan, but can we take weekend time when you don't work?

Shannon: Absolutely. How about a picnic this Sunday? We've haven't gone on a picnic in so long.

In the counterproposal scenario, John and Shannon were competing to get their own way. Neither tried to identify workable parts of the other's proposals or to find common ground. Because each adopts a win-lose view of the conflict, it's likely that both of them and the relationship will be losers. A very different tone shows up in the second, contracting scenario. Neither person represses personal needs, and each is committed to building on the other's proposals.

BETTINA My son and I used to argue all the time, and we never got anywhere, because we were each trying to get our own way, and we weren't paying attention to the other. Then, we went into family counseling, and we learned how to make our arguments more productive. The most important thing I learned was to be looking for ways to respond to what my son says and wants. Once I started focusing on him and trying to satisfy him, he was more willing to listen to my point of view and to think about solutions that would satisfy me. We still argue a lot—I guess we always will—but now it's more like we're working things through together instead of trying to tear each other down.

Specific differences between unproductive and productive conflict can be summarized as the difference between confirming and disconfirming communication. Communication that is characteristic of unproductive conflict disconfirms both individuals and the relationship, whereas the communication in constructive conflict consistently confirms both people and the relationship.

Conflict Management Skills

Our discussion of constructive and unproductive conflict communication highlights communication skills and attitudes we've emphasized in previous chapters. This is a good time to explain eight conflict management skills that rely on effective interpersonal communication.

Attend to the Relationship Level of Meaning Conflict situations, like all other communication encounters, involve both the content level and the relationship level of meaning. Yet, many of us tend to focus on the content level of meaning: the issues or the problem.

Focusing on the content level of meaning is understandable, but it's not enough, because it neglects a major dimension of communication. We need to tune into relationship-level meanings also. Who is she saying she is (my friend, my superior, my teacher)? Is he being responsive, showing liking, demonstrating power? What does this suggest about the relationship between us (it is not in jeopardy, its continuation depends on how we resolve this conflict)? It's equally important to monitor the relationship level of your own communication. Are you saying you care about getting your way more than you care about the relationship or other person? Are you communicating respect, attentiveness, or superiority? Are you attacking a coworker personally instead of arguing about issues? Are you affirming the relationship, even though there is a difference of opinions at the moment? During conflict, it's critical to think carefully about relationship-level messages and meanings.

Communicate Supportively An important conflict management skill is to monitor your communication to ensure that it encourages a supportive climate that is likely to build a win-win approach to conflict. From our discussion in Chapter 8, you'll recall that supportive interpersonal climates are cultivated by communication that is descriptive, provisional, spontaneous, problem oriented, empathic, and egalitarian. It's also useful to remind ourselves to avoid communication that tends to generate disconfirming climates: evaluation, certainty, strategies, control orientation, neutrality, and superiority, which we discussed in Chapter 8. In conflict situations, we may be especially likely to engage in communication that fosters defensiveness and reduces the possibilities for resolving the conflict and sustaining the relationship.

Listen Mindfully You already know that mindful listening is a very important interpersonal communication skill. This is especially true in conflict because we may not want to consider the other person's ideas or criticisms of our ideas. Even when you disagree with someone's thoughts, actions, goals, or values, you should show respect for the person by paying attention and seeking to understand him or her. That can be really difficult if the other person is not practicing effective communication skills. For example, imagine this scene: One morning as you enter your workplace, your coworker greets you by griping, "You're late again. Why can't you ever be



"Look, instead of constantly grading one another, let's make this a simple pass/fail relationship."

on time?" That kind of attack tends to make us feel defensive, so a natural reply might be, "What's your problem? Don't make a big deal out of 5 minutes. Get off my case." However, this kind of retort is likely to fan the flames of discord. A more effective reply would be, "I'm sorry I kept you waiting. I didn't know that the time I get here affects you." This response acknowledges your lateness, shows respect for your coworker's feelings, and opens the door to a conversation.

Take Responsibility for Your Thoughts, Feelings, and Issues Language is a cornerstone of effective conflict management. Own your feelings: "I feel angry when you are late" instead of "You make me angry with your lateness." It's also important to own your thoughts and your issues. "We need to keep this apartment cleaner" is a statement that you want the apartment cleaner. The other person may not care, in which case it's not accurate to say, "We need to keep this apartment cleaner." The issue is yours, so you should own it by saying, "I am uncomfortable with how messy this place is. Can we figure out a way to deal with this?"

Check Perceptions Perceptions are easily distorted when conflict is afoot. You may see another person's position as more extreme than it is; you may think someone is immature or unreasonable; you may be inclined to engage in self-serving bias, which we discussed in Chapter 3. During conflict, we need to check our perceptions. Paraphrasing is one effective way to do this: "So you think we should spend every weekend cleaning our apartment?" or "Does it seem to you that I'm always late?" We can also check perceptions by asking direct questions, being careful to avoid communication that fosters defensiveness: "What would be clean enough for you?" "Is it the 5 minutes I'm late that's bothering you, or does lateness mean something else to you?"

Checking perceptions is particularly important in online communication. I recently read a colleague's paper and e-mailed a response in which I suggested she strengthen one part of her analysis. She replied: "Okay." I wondered if the short reply meant I had offended her with my suggestion, so I called her and said, "I don't know what your 'okay' means. Are you angry about my suggestion?" She replied that she had been rushed and so had typed only a quick response. Paraphrasing and asking questions say, "You matter to me. I'm trying to understand you."

Look for Points of Agreement During conflict, we tend to focus on disagreements or ways we differ from another person. Although we should acknowledge and deal with real differences, we should also look for points of agreement. You and a coworker may disagree on goals, values, or courses of action, but you probably agree on other matters related to a conflict episode. Returning to the previous example, you and your coworker may disagree on whether being 5 minutes

Communication in Everyday Life

Career

Conflict in the Workplace

On-the-job conflict is common. Less common is skill in dealing with workplace conflict. Dr. Hendrie Weisinger is a therapist and consultant who has much experience in dealing with workplace conflict. His book *Anger at Work* (1996) offers two suggestions for handling workplace conflict effectively. First, try to defuse the conflict by improving the climate. Use your communication to demonstrate support, empathy, openness, and an interest in resolving the source of conflict. You might also suggest a "time out"—say you want to discuss the issue but need 10 minutes to take care of something first. This allows a cooling-off period.

Dr. Weisinger's second suggestion is to listen fully, mindfully. This can be difficult if the other person seems to be attacking you personally, yet focused listening is deeply confirming. Don't interrupt, correct, or argue. Just listen and try to understand the other person's perspective. Dealing with conflict in these two ways provides a foundation for productive conversation.



late is important. However, you may also share a belief that people who care about each other respect each other's feelings. This shared belief is common ground that may help you work out a resolution to the conflict. If we are looking for common ground, we can usually find it. When we do, we're likely to deal with conflict effectively without harming the relationship.

Look for Ways to Preserve the Other's Face In Japan and some other Asian cultures, *face* is a central concept. Your face is the image of yourself that you want others to see and believe (McDaniel & Quasha, 2000). We are embarrassed or ashamed when we lose face. Whereas Western cultures tend to emphasize protecting one's own face, many Asian cultures emphasize the importance of protecting others' faces (Ting-Toomey, 1988; Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001, 2002). The goal is for no one to feel defeated, stupid, or embarrassed.

Protecting others' faces is part of managing conflict effectively (Metts & Cupach, 2008). If your point or idea is accepted in an argument, be gracious toward the other person. He or she is likely to feel face is lost if you say, "I knew you'd come around." If you are committed to protecting the other person's face, you might say, "I appreciate your generosity in understanding how important this is to me." This statement allows the person who may have lost the argument to retain dignity and save face.

Imagine How You'll Feel in the Future Recall that, in Chapter 4, we noted that one of our symbolic abilities is hypothetical thought. Among other things, this capacity allows us to imagine ourselves in the future and to respond to the future self that we imagine (Honeycutt, 2008). You can use this ability to help you manage conflict effectively. To illustrate, consider this scenario: A friend has just told you that he borrowed your car without asking and had a minor accident. You feel like shouting and attacking the friend verbally.

Before you say anything, you imagine how you would feel tomorrow or next week or next year if you launched a scathing attack on your friend. Then, you imagine how you would feel tomorrow or next week or next year if you expressed your anger calmly yet not aggressively, showed concern about whether your friend was hurt in the accident, and found a way to help your friend save face. You probably prefer the you who behaved considerately to the you who behaved combatively. Taking a moment to imagine yourself after the conflict ends can help you choose to communicate in ways that are ethical, that foster self-respect, and that support the continuation of the relationship.

The eight skills we've discussed translate general communication skills and principles into the specific context of interpersonal conflict. Developing competence in these eight skills will empower you to manage conflict competently, graciously, and effectively. Figure 9.2 summarizes skills for managing conflict productively.

FIGURE 9.2
Conflict Management Skills
Cengage Learning

Attend to relationship-level meanings.
Communicate supportively.
Listen mindfully.
Own your feelings, thoughts, and issues.
Check perceptions.
Look for points of agreement.
Look for ways to preserve the other's face.
Imagine how you will feel in the future.

Guidelines for Effective Communication during Conflict

Our study of conflict, along with many of the ideas we've considered in previous chapters, suggests five guidelines for dealing with conflict constructively.

Focus on the Overall Communication System

As we noted in Chapter 1, communication is systemic, which means it occurs in contexts, and it is composed of many interacting parts. Applying the principle of systems to conflict, we can see that how we deal with conflict is shaped by the overall systems of relationships and communication.

People who have developed negative interpersonal climates cannot argue constructively simply by practicing "good conflict techniques" such as focusing talk and not interrupting. Those techniques occur within larger contexts that affect how they are interpreted. People who have learned to be generally defensive and distrustful are unlikely to respond openly to even the best conflict resolution methods. By the same reasoning, in climates that are generally supportive and confirming, even unconstructive conflict communication is unlikely to derail relationships. Conflict, like all interaction, is affected by larger contexts in which it takes place.

In other words, conflict is part of a larger whole, and we must make that whole healthy to create a context in which conflict can be resolved without jeopardizing partners or relationships. Keep in mind that conflict always has implications for three parties: you, another person, and the relationship between the two of you. Healthy conflict communication honors all three.

Time Conflict Purposefully

Timing affects how we communicate about conflicts. There are three ways to use chronemics so that conflicts are most likely to be effective.

First, try not to engage in serious conflict discussions at times when one or both people will not be fully present psychologically. Most of us are less attentive, less mindful rather than in public settings (Cupach & Carlson, 2002). If time is limited or if we are rushing, we're less likely to take the time to deal constructively with differences. It's impossible to listen well and respond thoughtfully when a stopwatch is ticking in our minds.

It's also considerate and constructive to deal with conflict when each person is ready to talk constructively about a problem. Of course, this works only if the person who isn't ready agrees to talk about the issue at a later time. Because research indicates that men are more likely than women to avoid discussing relationship conflicts, they may be especially reluctant to talk about disagreements without first gaining some distance (Beck, 1988; Rusbult, 1987). Some people prefer to tackle problems as soon as they arise, whereas others need time to percolate privately before interacting. It's generally a good idea not to write when angry to see if that's what you want to send when you've cooled down. Constructive, healthy conflict communication is more likely when tempers aren't flaring.

STEPHANIE I have a really hot temper, so I can cut someone to pieces if I argue when I'm mad. I have hurt a lot of friends by attacking them before I cooled off, and I hate myself when I act like that. I have finally figured out that I can handle fights constructively if I cool down. Now when I'm hot, I tell my friends or my boyfriend that I can't discuss it right then. Later, when I'm calm, I can talk without saying things that hurt them and that I feel bad about.

A third use of chronemics to promote positive conflict is bracketing, which we discussed earlier in this chapter. It is natural for a variety of issues needing attention to come up in the course of conflict. If we try to deal with all the sideline problems that arise, however, we can't focus on the immediate problem. Bracketing other concerns for

later discussion lets us keep conflict focused productively. Keep in mind, however, that bracketing works only if partners return to the issues they set aside.

Aim for Win-Win Conflict

How you approach conflict shapes what will happen in communication. When conflict exists between two people who care about each other and want to sustain a good relationship, the win-win style is usually the best choice. If you enter conflict with the assumption that you, the other person, and the relationship can all benefit from conflict, it's likely that you will bring about a resolution that benefits everyone. Adopting a win-win orientation to conflict reflects a commitment to honoring yourself, the other person, and the integrity of your shared relationship.

To maximize the chance of a win-win conflict resolution, begin by identifying your feelings and your needs or desires in the situation. You may want to review Chapter 7 and to remind yourself of ways to clarify your emotions. Understanding your feelings and desires is essential to productive conflict communication. It's not effective to make vague or judgmental statements such as, "I don't like the way you ignore me, and I want you to be more sensitive." It would be more effective to say, "I feel hurt when you don't call, and I want us to find some way that I can be assured of your love without making you feel handcuffed."

The second step is to figure out what the other person wants and feels, don't mind read. Instead, ask don't already know what the other person is feeling and what she or he needs or wants in terms of a resolution to the conflict. When the other person expresses feelings and preferences, listen mindfully. Resist the temptation to countercomplain. Just listen, and try to understand the other person's perspective as fully as you can. Minimal encouragers and paraphrasing let the other person know you are listening closely and are committed to understanding her or his perspective.

Third, focus on language that promotes cooperation and mutual respect. To do this, rely on supportive communication, and try to avoid communication that fosters a defensive climate. You should also use *I* language to own your thoughts and feelings. Throughout conflict communication, mindful listening allows you to gain the maximum understanding of the other person's perspective and feelings.

Finally, keep reminding yourself that win-win solutions are most likely when both people balance concern for themselves and concern for each other. On the relationship level of meaning, you want to communicate this message: "I care about you and your feelings and desires, and I know you care about me and how I feel and what I want." If that message underlies your conflict communication, chances are good that you will attain a win-win resolution.

Honor Yourself, Your Partner, and the Relationship

Throughout this book, we've emphasized the importance of honoring yourself, others, and relationships. It's important to keep all three in balance, especially when conflicts arise.

Constructive conflict communication is impossible if we disregard or demean the other person's needs and feelings. Doing so disconfirms the other and sets a win-lose tone for conversation. It is equally undesirable to muffle your own needs and feelings. In fairness to yourself and the other person, you should express your feelings and needs clearly.

In addition to attending to ourselves and others, we must remember that relationships are affected by how we handle conflict. For this reason, win-lose orientations toward conflict should really be called win-lose-lose, because when only one person wins, both the other person and the relationship lose. Win-win orientations and constructive forms

of communication make it possible for both individuals and the relationship to win.

Show Grace When Appropriate

Finally, an important principle to keep in mind during conflict is that grace is sometimes appropriate. Grace is granting forgiveness or putting aside our own needs when there is no standard that says we should or must do so. Grace is not the same thing as forgiving because social norms indicate we *should*. For instance, most people in Western culture believe that we should excuse inappropriate behavior from individuals who are sick or not able to control their behavior for other reasons. While this is appropriate, and often kind, this is not an act of grace; rather, it is a response to social norms.

Also, grace isn't allowing others to have their way when we have no choice. Instead, grace is unearned, unrequired kindness. For instance, two roommates agree to split chores, and one doesn't do her share, because she has three tests in a week. Her roommate might do all the chores even though there is no agreement or expectation of this generosity. This is an act of grace. It's also an act of grace to defer to another person's preference when you could hold out for your own. Similarly, when someone hurts us and has no right to expect forgiveness, we may choose to forgive anyway. We do so not because we have to but because we want to. Grace is a matter of choice.

Grace involves letting go of anger, blame, and judgments about another and what she or he did. When we let go of these feelings, we release both ourselves and others from their consequences. Sometimes, we tell a friend that we forgive him for some offense, but then later we remind him of it. When we hang on to blame and judgment, we haven't really let go, so we have not really shown grace. There's no grace when we blackmail others for our kindness or hang on to hostile feelings.

Grace is given without strings. Arthur Osborne (1996) believes that grace is essential in loving relationships. He says, "The person who asks for a reward is a merchant, not a lover" (p. 6). We show kindness, defer our needs, or forgive a wrong without any expectation of reward. Grace isn't doing something nice to make a friend feel grateful or indebted to us. Nor do we act in grace when we do something with the expectation of a payoff. To do a favor because you want a reciprocal favor is bargaining, not showing grace. For an act to be one of grace, it must be done without conditions or expectations of return.

Grace is not always appropriate. People can take advantage of grace and kindness. Some people repeatedly abuse and hurt others, confident that pardons will be granted. When grace is extended and then exploited, it may be unwise to extend it again to the same person. However, if you show grace in good faith, and another abuses it, you should not fault yourself. Kindness and a willingness to forgive are worthy ethical values. The richest and most enduring relationships allow room for grace occasionally.

It is important to honor and assert ourselves, as we've emphasized throughout this book. However, self-interest and self-assertion alone are insufficient ethical principles for creating rich interpersonal relationships. None of us is perfect. We all make mistakes, wound others with thoughtless acts, and occasionally do things we know are wrong and hurtful. Sometimes, there is no reason others should forgive us when we wrong them; we have no right to expect exoneration.

Reflecting on the value of granting grace for all parties, one writer (Walters, 1984) offered this moving insight: "When we have been hurt we have two alternatives: be destroyed by



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Douglas Kelley (1998) and Vincent Waldron (Waldron & Kelley, 2007) emphasize forgiveness as a major influence on how—or whether—relationships progress. They note that transgressions, both minor and major, are inevitable in relationships, so the question becomes, “How do couples go forward after harm has been done?”

Waldron and Kelley state that one crucial dynamic in the forgiveness process is motivations of both the transgressor and the forgiver. Forgiveness is most likely to occur and to allow relationship continuity when both parties are motivated by a desire to restore the well-being of themselves, each other, and the relationship. People are more likely to grant forgiveness to a person who apologizes, expresses remorse, or takes responsibility for the wrong. Kelley and Waldron also state that the capacity to forgive is enhanced if the forgiver can reframe the hurtful event by gaining understanding into it, attributing it to factors beyond the offender's control, or viewing it as unintentional. Finally, Waldron and Kelley emphasize that forgiving is a process, not an event that occurs in a single moment. They emphasize that, even after forgiveness is granted, time is needed to heal a relationship, restore trust, and return to healthy, comfortable interaction.

Adding to Waldron and Kelly's research is a study by William Cupach and Christine Carlson (2002). They found that forgiveness is more than a set of behaviors and more than efforts to overcome negative feelings, such as wanting revenge. At least as important, they report, is a desire to accept and confirm another, even—or especially—after a transgression of some sort.

The Forgiveness Institute has a website that includes a reading room, message boards, related links, and information about upcoming conferences and workshops: <http://www.forgivenessweb.com/>.

Communication is a particularly important influence on interpersonal conflict. Communication skills that promote constructive conflict management include being mindful, confirming others, showing dual perspective, listening sensitively, focusing discussion, contracting solutions, and avoiding mind reading, interrupting, self-summarizing, and cross-complaining.

We closed the chapter by identifying five guidelines for increasing the productivity of interpersonal conflict. First, we need to remember that conflicts occur within overall systems of communication and relationships. To be constructive, conflict must take place within supportive, confirming climates in which good interpersonal communication is practiced. Second, it's important to time conflicts so that all people have the time they need for private reflection and for productive discussion. A third principle is to aim for win-win solutions. Consistent with these three guidelines is working to balance commitments to yourself, others, and relationships when conflict arises.

Although grace can be exploited, it can also infuse relationships with kindness and make room for inevitable human errors. It's important to balance the tensions inherent in the notion of grace so that we recognize both its potential values and its dangers.

resentment, or forgive. Resentment is death; forgiving leads to healing and life” (p. 366). For human relationships to live and thrive, there must be some room for redemption, for forgiveness, and for grace.

Chapter Summary

Because conflicts are normal and unavoidable in any relationship of real depth, the challenge is to learn to manage conflicts effectively. Patterns of conflict are shaped by how people view conflict. We discussed lose-lose, win-lose, and win-win approaches to conflict, and explored how each affects interaction. In addition, conflict patterns are influenced by how people respond to tension. Inclinations to exit, neglect, show loyalty, or voice conflict vary in how actively they deal with tension and how constructive they are for relationships. In most cases, voice is the preferred response because only voice allows partners to intervene actively and constructively when conflicts arise.

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Case Study

Continuing the Conversation

The following conversation is featured at your Online Resources for *Interpersonal Communication: Everyday Encounters*. Click on the link to launch the video and audio scenario scripted below. When you've watched the video, critique and analyze this encounter based on the principles you learned in this chapter by responding to the analysis questions. By clicking the “Submit” button at the end of the form, you can compare your work to my suggested responses. Let's continue the discussion online!



Ellie is sitting in the living room reading when her sister Andrea walks in.

Andrea: Hey, El. What are you working on there?

Ellie: [dismissive] This book for my French lit class—I'm way behind.

Andrea: Ok. Can I talk to you for just a few minutes?

Ellie: I'm really behind, Andrea. Can it wait?

Andrea: Not really—I promise I'll be quick.

Ellie: [huffs and puts down the book] Fine. What?

Andrea: Ok, see, that's part of it. The way you just said “what?” Like you're already annoyed with me.

Ellie: Well, I told you that I'm busy. So yeah, you're annoying me.

Andrea: [hurt] You're so short with me lately.

Ellie: [seeing that she's hurt, trying to lighten the mood slightly] You're my sister, you're supposed to annoy me.

Andrea: Yeah. But lately it seems to happen a lot. And sometimes you get a little out of hand. Like the other night. . . .

Ellie: [defensive] What about the other night?

Andrea: You tried to throw your alarm clock at me when we argued about whose turn it was to do the laundry.

Ellie: But I didn't throw it.

Andrea: Yeah, because it was plugged in.

Ellie: Well, what do you want me to say?

Andrea: I want to know why you're so angry all the time. You

seem so unhappy. And you get so enraged over nothing.

Ellie: [angry and defensive] Nothing?! I had two exams the next day when you told me I had to do the laundry! So what you call nothing is actually my education, my entire future! It's not my fault that you're too lazy or maybe too much of a jerk to care about your classes or lift a finger to help around here!

Andrea: See? This is what I mean. You never used to call me names. You never used to yell at me before. We would talk. I'm afraid to even try to talk to you. And sometimes I'm sorry—not to mention hurt—when I do try.

Ellie: [pauses when she sees Andrea hurt but is still a little defensive] I'm sorry. You're the only person I have to vent to and sometimes I get a little . . . carried away I guess.

Continuing the Conversation

Andrea: I am too for not being as understanding as I could about your schedule and stress. But

Andrea: Sounds great!

this scenario: do you see inclinations to exit, neglect, show loyalty, or voice conflict? What consequences result from the conflict responses used in this dialog?

3. Is metacommunication used constructively or unproductively in this conversation and by whom?
4. Review the eight conflict management skills discussed in this chapter. Identify examples of these skills in the dialogue between Andrea and Elle.
5. How do you perceive the role of forgiveness in this conversation? Based on what you've learned in this chapter, can you explain why Andrea seems so quick to forgive Elle for her behavior?

Now that you've read Chapter 9, use your Online Resources for *Interpersonal Communication: Everyday Encounters* for quick access to the electronic study resources that accompany this text. You can access your Online Resources at <http://www.cengage.com/login>, using the access code that came with your book or that you bought online at <http://cengagebrain.com>. Your Online Resources give you access to the "Continuing the Conversation" video scenario and questions for this chapter, to InfoTrac College Edition, to maintained and updated web links, and to the study aids for this chapter, including a digital glossary, review quizzes, and the chapter activities.

Engage the ideas in this chapter by considering questions that call for active learning and for applying chapter concepts to workplace communication.



Active Learning: Reflect on the ways you respond to conflict. Are you satisfied with how you manage conflict? If not, experiment with some alternative ways of responding to conflict that are described in this chapter.

Workplace Application: Recall a time when you experienced conflict with a coworker. Using the Chinese character for crisis to frame that situation, describe the opportunity and the danger that were at stake.

Key Concepts

- bracketing 236
- contracting 237
- exit response 231
- games 224
- grace 243

- interpersonal conflict 221
- kitchen-sinking 234
- lose-lose 229
- loyalty response 232
- neglect response 231

- passive aggression 224
- voice response 232
- win-lose 229
- win-win 230



Everyday Applications

You can complete these activities online at your Online Resources for Interpersonal Communication: Everyday Encounters and, if requested, submit them to your instructor.

1. Understanding Your Conflict Script

What conflict script did you learn in your family? Think back to your childhood and adolescence, and try to remember rules for conflict that your family modeled implicitly and principles of conflict that your family explicitly endorsed.

- Did people disagree openly with each other?
- What was said when disagreements surfaced? Did your parents suggest that it was rude to argue? Did they encourage open discussion of differences? Were there any "rules" for how to argue?
- What happened if disagreements were dealt with directly? Was the conflict resolved? What was the climate in the family like after the conflict?
- How do you currently reflect your family's conflict script? Now that you can edit family scripts and author your own, how would you like to deal with conflict?

2. Identifying Games in Your Communication

Apply what you've read about covert conflict to your own life. Describe an instance when you or someone you have a relationship with played each of these games:

Blemish NIGYYSOB
Mine Is Worse Than Yours Yes, But

What was accomplished by playing the games?
Were the real conflicts addressed?

3. Identifying Your Conflict Orientations

From this discussion, do you know your orientation to conflict? To check, answer these questions:

1. When conflict seems about to occur, do you:
 - a. think of arguments that promote your solution?
 - b. worry that everyone is going to get hurt?
 - c. think that there's probably a way to satisfy everyone?
2. When involved in conflict, do you:
 - a. feel competitive urges?
 - b. feel resigned that everyone will lose?
 - c. feel committed to finding a mutual solution?