

LECTURE 10: MANAGING CONFLICTS IN INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION**Learning Outcomes**

You should be able to:

1. Understanding Interpersonal Conflict and Conflict defined
2. Explain Communication Climates
3. Identify disconfirming messages and replace them with confirming ones,
4. Use the Gibb categories of supportive communication.
5. Apply the approaches to an interpersonal conflict resolution.
6. Conflict Communication Styles

Many people often think of conflict as a bad thing. Actually, it doesn't have to be. Conflict is natural, normal, and important. It can strengthen a relationship by clearing the air of grievances, making space for a deeper understanding, and increased closeness. It allows us to express our own needs, and in this way, demonstrates concern and regard for the self.

Conflict defined

Let us start with a definition of conflict. According to research, conflict is "**an expressed struggle between interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference.**" Let's break this down for better clarity and understanding. Conflict has to be an **expressed struggle**. This is more than an internal disagreement; it has to be expressed either verbally or nonverbally.

Next, conflict only exists between **interdependent parties**. That is, there's only conflict when you and another person must rely on each other in some way. For example, in a work situation, the employee relies upon the supervisor to provide direction, and the supervisor relies upon the employee to deliver as requested. Each must depend upon the other for the work to be acceptably accomplished.

The next component of conflict is a **perception of incompatible goals**. Note that these goals are *perceived* as incompatible; in reality, they may or may not be. The incompatibility of goals means that one person wants one thing, while the other person wants something else. In the

context of feedback and criticism, the person providing the critique wants something different from the person who has performed the action, though that action may seem perfectly acceptable to the one performing it.

Next, conflict appears when **resources are scarce**. Such resources often include time, money, power, and space. When one person wants to use one or more of these resources differently than the other person, conflict may likely ensue.

Finally, conflict includes **interference**. This means that each of the parties attempts to prevent the other from achieving his or her goal. Such interference might include one person imposing pressure ("nagging") to meet a deadline while the other person wishes to complete the task in his or her own time.

In a summary according to Adler, Rosenfeld, and Proctor II ():

- I. *Conflict* is an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from the other party in achieving their goals.
 - A. Expressed struggle captures the notion that conflict does not exist unless all the people involved know that the disagreement exists even if the expressed struggle is not verbalized.
 - B. Perceived incompatible goals is a situation where it seems as if the goals of those involved are mutually exclusive, but that is not always the case, as mutually satisfying answers can be agreed upon.
 - C. Perception of scarce resources occurs when people believe there are not enough resources, such as time, money, affection and space to go around.
 - D. Interdependence is another feature that captures the notion that people in a conflict are dependent upon each other.
 - E. Inevitability addresses that fact that conflicts are impossible to avoid; the challenge is to handle them effectively when they occur.

Characteristics of conflict

There are certain characteristics of conflict in addition to it being natural, normal, and important. Conflict can be expressed directly or indirectly, and it can be beneficial or harmful.

Conflict is often expressed **directly**, through the verbal channel, or through spoken words. This route can lead to emotional escalation and increase the seriousness of the conflict, though it can also lead to a quicker resolution.

It is also often expressed **indirectly**, through the nonverbal channel, or through gestures and movements, such as door-slamming; facial expressions, such as eye rolling; and nonverbal utterances, such as scoffing. Indirect expressions of conflict can be considered passive aggressive, but sometimes this route is preferred in order to avoid a confrontation and potentially

put strain on the relationship. The major drawback to indirect expressions of conflict is that while it may be easier and more comfortable, it can leave the matter unresolved for a longer period of time. Which approach you take will depend upon the situation, your goals, the person with whom you're interacting, and the importance of the desired outcome.

Conflict isn't always a pleasant experience. This is not new information. For this reason, people often avoid it.

SOURCE: Universalclass.com, characteristics of Conflict in communication

<https://www.universalclass.com/articles/writing/business-communication/conflict-resolution/the-characteristics-of-conflict-in-communication.htm#:~:text=According%20to%20research%2C%20conflict%20is,to%20be%20an%20expressed%20struggle.>

Functional conflict versus Dysfunctional conflict

According to Adler, Rosenfeld, and Proctor II (2012), in a *functional conflict*, participants achieve the best possible outcome, unlike a *dysfunctional conflict*, where the outcome falls short of what is possible.

- A. Integration versus polarization describes how participants in a dysfunctional conflict regard each other as polar opposites, while participants in a functional conflict recognize that they are integrated or in a difficult situation together.
- B. Cooperation versus opposition means that cooperation is possible in interpersonal conflicts, although participants in a dysfunctional conflict see each other as opponents.
- C. Confirmation versus disconfirmation occurs in functional conflicts, where participants disagree but are not disagreeable.
- D. Agreement versus coercion is described when, in destructive conflicts, participants use coercion to get what they want instead of finding ways to reach an agreement.
- E. De-escalation versus escalation addresses the fact that in functional conflicts the participants solve more problems than they create, while in dysfunctional conflicts the problems grow larger instead of smaller.
- F. Focusing versus drifting is the idea that, in dysfunctional conflicts, the participants drift away from the original problem and bring in other issues.
- G. Foresight versus shortsightedness occurs when foresight is a feature of functional conflicts, while shortsightedness can produce dysfunctional conflicts.
- H. Positive versus negative results describes the notion that functional conflicts have positive results, such as finding a solution that works, while a dysfunctional conflict has negative results, such as neither participant receiving what they want, and threatens the future of the relationship.

COMMUNICATION CLIMATES IN INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Personal relationships are a lot like the weather. Some are fair and warm, whereas others are stormy and cold; some are polluted, and others healthy. Some relationships have stable climates, whereas others change dramatically calm one moment and turbulent the next. You can't measure the interpersonal climate by looking at a thermometer or glancing at the sky, but it's there nonetheless. Every relationship has a feeling, a pervasive mood that colors the interactions of the participants. The term communication climate refers to the emotional tone of a relationship. A climate doesn't involve specific activities as much as the way people feel about each other as they carry out those activities. Consider two communication classes, for example. Both meet for the same length of time and follow the same syllabus. It's easy to imagine how one of these classes might be a friendly, comfortable place to learn, whereas the other might be cold and tense even hostile. The same principle holds for families, coworkers, and other relationships: Communication climates are a function more of the way people feel about one another than of the tasks they perform.

Confirming and Disconfirming Messages

What makes some climates positive and others negative? A short but accurate answer is that the communication climate is determined by the degree to which people see themselves as valued. When we believe others view us as important, we are likely to feel good about our relationship. On the other hand, the relational climate suffers when we think others don't appreciate or care about us. Messages that show you are valued have been called confirming responses.

In one form or another, confirming responses say "you exist," "you matter," "you're important." Actually, it's an oversimplification to talk about one type of confirming message. In truth, confirming communication occurs on three increasingly positive levels:

- *Recognition*

The most fundamental act of confirmation is to recognize the other person. Recognition seems easy and obvious, and yet there are many times when we do not respond to others on this basic level. Failure to write or visit a friend is a common example. So is failure to return a phone message. Avoiding eye contact and not approaching someone you know on campus, at a party, or

on the street send a negative message. Of course, this lack of recognition may simply be an oversight. You might not notice your friend, or the pressures of work and school might prevent you from staying in touch. Nonetheless, if the other person perceives you as avoiding contact, the message has the effect of being disconfirming.

- *Acknowledgment*

Acknowledging the ideas and feelings of others is a stronger form of confirmation. Listening is probably the most common form of acknowledgment. Of course, counterfeit listening ambushing, stage hogging, pseudolistening, and so on has the opposite effect of acknowledgment. More active acknowledgment includes asking questions, paraphrasing, and reflecting. Not surprisingly, employees rate managers who solicit their suggestions highly even when the managers don't accept every suggestion.

The speaker's thoughts and feelings in public speaking can be a powerful way to offer support when others have problems.

- *Endorsement*

Whereas acknowledgment means you are interested in another's ideas, endorsement means that you agree with them. It's easy to see why endorsement is the strongest type of confirming message, because it communicates the highest form of valuing. The most obvious form of endorsement is agreeing. Fortunately, it isn't necessary to agree completely with another person in order to endorse her or his message. You can probably find something in the message that you endorse. "I can see why you were so angry," you might reply to a friend, even if you don't approve of his outburst. Of course, out-right praise is a strong form of endorsement and one you can use surprisingly often after you look for opportunities to compliment others. Nonverbal endorsement can also enhance the quality of a relational climate. For example, women rate men who agree with them as more physically attractive than those who fail to do so.

It's hard to overstate the importance of confirming messages. For instance, a positive climate is the best predictor of marital satisfaction. Satisfied couples have a 5:1 ratio of positive to negative statements, whereas the ratio for dissatisfied partners is 1:1. Positive, confirming messages are just as important in families. For example, the satisfaction that sibling feels with one another drops sharply as aggressive, and disconfirming messages increase. Confirmation is just as

important in the classroom, where motivation and learning increase when teachers demonstrate a genuine interest and concern for students. In contrast to confirming communication, messages that deny the value of others have been labeled disconfirming responses.

These show a lack of regard for the other person either by disputing or ignoring some important part of that person's message.

- *Disagreement*

It can certainly be disconfirming, especially if it goes beyond disputing the other person's ideas and attacks the speaker personally. However, disagreement is not the most damaging kind of disconfirmation. It may be tough to hear someone say, "I don't think that's a good idea," but a personal attack like "You're crazy" is even tougher to hear. Far worse than disagreements are responses that ignores others' ideas or even their existence.

How Communication Climates Develop

As soon as two people start to communicate, a relational climate begins to develop. If the messages are confirming, the climate is likely to be a positive one. If they disconfirm one another, the climate is likely to be hostile, cold, or defensive. Verbal messages certainly contribute to the tone of a relationship, but many climate-shaping messages are nonverbal. The very act of approaching others is confirming, whereas avoiding them can be disconfirming. Smiles or frowns, the presence or absence of eye contact, tone of voice, the use of personal space all these and other cues send messages about how the parties feel toward one another. After a climate is formed, it can take on a life of its own and grow in a self-perpetuating **spiral**: a reciprocating communication pattern in which each person's message reinforces the others.

- a. In positive spirals, one partner's confirming message leads to a similar response from the other person. This positive reaction leads the first person to be even more reinforcing.
- b. Negative spirals are just as powerful, though they leave the partners feeling worse about themselves and each other.

Research shows how spirals operate in relationships to reinforce the principle that "what goes around comes around." In one study of married couples, each spouse's response in conflict

situations was similar to the other's statement. Conciliatory statements (for example, supporting, accepting responsibilities, agreeing) were likely to be followed by conciliatory responses. Confrontational acts (such as criticism, hostile questions, and fault finding) were likely to trigger aggressive responses. The same pattern held for other kinds of messages: Avoidance begat avoidance, analysis begat analysis, and so on.

Escalatory conflict spirals are the most visible way that disconfirming messages reinforce one another. One attack leads to another until a skirmish escalates into a full-fledged battle. Although they are less obvious, **de-escalatory conflict spirals** can also be destructive. Rather than fighting, the parties slowly lessen their dependence on one another, withdraw, and become less invested in the relationship.

Spirals rarely go on indefinitely. Most relationships pass through cycles of progression and regression. If the spiral is negative, partners may find the exchange growing so unpleasant that they switch from negative to positive messages without discussing the matter. In other cases they may engage in metacommunication. "Hold on," one might say. "This is getting us nowhere." In some cases, however, partners pass the "point of no return," leading to the breakup of a relationship. Even positive spirals have their limit: Even the best relationships go through periods of conflict and withdrawal, although a combination of time and communication skills can eventually bring the partners back into greater harmony.

Creating Positive Communication Climates

It's easy to see how disconfirming messages can pollute a communication climate. But what are some alternative ways of communicating that encourage positive relationships? The work of Jack Gibb gives a picture of what kinds of messages lead to both positive and negative spirals.

After observing groups for several years, Gibb was able to isolate six types of defense-arousing communication and six contrasting behaviors that seemed to reduce the level of threat and defensiveness. The Gibb categories are listed in Table 7-2. Using the supportive types of communication and avoiding the defensive ones will increase the odds of creating and maintaining positive communication climates in your relationships.

TABLE 7 - 2

TABLE 7-1 The Gibb Categories of Defensive and Supportive Behaviors	
Defensive Behaviors	Supportive Behaviors
1. Evaluation	1. Description
2. Control	2. Problem Orientation
3. Strategy	3. Spontaneity
4. Neutrality	4. Empathy
5. Superiority	5. Equality
6. Certainty	6. Provisionalism

Source: Adler, R.B. & Rodmann, G. (2006) *Understanding human communication*. 9th edition. London: Oxford University Press.

MANAGING INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT

Even the most supportive communication climate won't guarantee complete harmony. Regardless of what we may wish for or dream about, a conflict-free world just doesn't exist. Even the best communicators, the luckiest people, are bound to wind up in situations when their needs don't match the needs of others. Money, time, power, sex, humor, aesthetic taste, as well as a thousand other issues, arise and keep us from living in a state of perpetual agreement. For many people the inevitability of conflict is a depressing fact. They think that the existence of ongoing conflict means that there's little chance for happy relationships with others. Effective communicators know differently, however. They realize that although it's impossible to eliminate conflict, there are ways to manage it effectively. And those effective communicators know the subject of this chapter that managing conflict skillfully can open the door to healthier, stronger, and more satisfying relationships.

The Nature of Conflict

Whatever forms they may take, all interpersonal conflicts share certain similarities. Joyce Frost and William Wilmot provide a thorough definition of conflict. They state that conflict is an

expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce rewards, and interference from the other parties in achieving their goals. A closer look at the various parts of this definition helps to develop a clearer idea of how conflicts operate.

EXPRESSED STRUGGLE

A conflict doesn't exist unless both parties know that some disagreement exists. You may be upset for months because a neighbor's loud stereo keeps you from getting to sleep at night, but no conflict exists between the two of you until the neighbor learns about your problem. Of course, the expressed struggle doesn't have to be verbal. You can show your displeasure with somebody without saying a word. Giving a dirty look, using the silent treatment, and avoiding the other person are all ways of expressing yourself. But one way or another, both parties must know that a problem exists before they're in conflict.

PERCEIVED INCOMPATIBLE GOALS

Conflicts often look as if one party's gain will be another's loss. For instance, consider the neighbor whose music keeps you awake at night. Does somebody have to lose? A neighbor who turns down the noise loses the enjoyment of hearing the music at full volume; but if the neighbor keeps the volume up, then you're still awake and unhappy. But the goals in this situation really aren't completely incompatible solutions do exist that allow both parties to get what they want. For instance, you could achieve peace and quiet by closing your windows and getting the neighbor to do the same. You might use a pair of earplugs. Or perhaps the neighbor could get a set of headphones and listen to the music at full volume without bothering any-one. If any of these solutions proves workable, then the conflict disappears. Unfortunately, people often fail to see mutually satisfying answers to their problems. And as long as they perceive their goals to be mutually exclusive, they create a self-fulfilling prophecy in which the conflict is very real.

PERCEIVED SCARCE REWARDS

In a conflict, people believe there isn't enough of some resource to go around. The most obvious example of a scarce resource is money a cause of many conflicts. If a person asks for a raise in pay and the boss would rather keep the money or use it to expand the business, then the two parties are in conflict. Time is another scarce commodity. As authors and family men, both of us are constantly in the middle of struggles about how to use the limited time we have to spend.

Should we work on this book? Visit with our wives? Spend time with our kids? Enjoy the luxury of being alone? With only twenty-four hours in a day we're bound to end up in conflicts with our families, editors, students, and friends all of whom want more of our time than we have available to give.

INTERDEPENDENCE

However antagonistic they might feel toward each other, the parties in a conflict are usually dependent on each other. The welfare and satisfaction of one depend on the actions of another. If this weren't true, then even in the face of scarce resources and incompatible goals there would be no need for conflict. Interdependence exists between conflicting nations, social groups, organizations, friends, and lovers. In each case, if the two parties didn't need each other to solve the problem, both would go their separate ways. In fact, many conflicts go unresolved because the parties fail to understand their interdependence. One of the first steps toward resolving a conflict is to take the attitude that "we're in this together."

Methods of Conflict Resolution

No matter what the relational style, gender, or culture of the participants, every conflict is a struggle to have one's goals met. Sometimes that struggle succeeds, and at other times it fails. In the remainder of this chapter we'll look at various approaches to resolving conflicts and see which ones are most promising.

WIN-LOSE

Win-lose conflicts are ones in which one party achieves its goal at the expense of the other. People resort to this method of resolving disputes when they perceive a situation as being an "either-or" one: Either I get what I want, or you get your way. The most clear-cut examples of win-lose situations are certain games, such as baseball or poker, in which the rules require a winner and a loser. Some interpersonal issues seem to fit into this win-lose framework: two coworkers seeking a promotion to the same job, for instance, or a couple who disagree on how to spend their limited money. Power is the distinguishing characteristic in win-lose problem solving, because it is necessary to defeat an opponent to get what you want. The most obvious kind of power is physical. Some parents threaten their children with warnings such as "Stop

misbehaving, or I'll send you to your room." Adults who use physical power to deal with each other usually aren't so blunt, but the legal system is the implied threat: "Follow the rules, or we'll lock you up."

LOSE-LOSE

In lose-lose problem solving, neither side is satisfied with the outcome. Although the name of this approach is so discouraging that it's hard to imagine how anyone could willingly use it, in truth lose-lose is a fairly common way to handle conflicts. In many instances the parties will both strive to be winners, but as a result of the struggle, both end up losers. On the international scene many wars illustrate this sad point. A nation that gains military victory at the cost of thousands of lives, large amounts of resources, and a damaged national consciousness hasn't truly won much. On an interpersonal level the same principle holds true. Most of us have seen battles of pride in which both parties strike out and both suffer.

COMPROMISE

Unlike lose-lose outcomes; a compromise gives both parties at least some of what they wanted, though both sacrifice part of their goals. People usually settle for compromises when they see partial satisfaction as the best they can hope for. Although a compromise may be better than losing every-thing, this approach hardly seems to deserve the positive image it has with some people. In his valuable book on conflict resolution, management consultant Albert Filley makes an interesting observation about our attitudes toward this approach. Why is it, he asks, that if someone says, "I will compromise my values," we view the action unfavorably, yet we talk admiringly about parties in a conflict who compromise to reach a solution? Although compromises may be the best obtainable result in some conflicts, it's important to realize that both people in a dispute can often work together to find much better solutions. In such cases compromise is a negative word. Most of us are surrounded by the results of bad compromises. Consider a common example: the conflict between one person's desire to smoke cigarettes and another's need to breathe clean air. The win-lose outcomes of this conflict are obvious: Either the smoker abstains, or the nonsmoker gets polluted lungs neither very satisfying. But a compromise in which the smoker gets to enjoy only a rare cigarette or must retreat outdoors and in which the nonsmoker still must inhale some fumes or feel like an ogre is hardly better. Both

sides have lost a considerable amount of both comfort and goodwill. Of course, the costs involved in other compromises are even greater. For example, if a divorced couple compromise on child care by haggling over custody and then finally grudgingly agree to split the time with their children, it's hard to say that anybody has won.

WIN-WIN

In Win-win problem solving, the goal is to find a solution that satisfies the needs of everyone involved. Not only do the parties avoid trying to win at the other's expense, but also they believe that by working together it is possible to find a solution that allows both to reach their goals.

Some compromises approach this win-win ideal. You and the seller might settle on a price for a used car that is between what the seller was asking and what you wanted to pay. Although neither of you got everything you wanted, the outcome would still leave both of you satisfied. Likewise, you and your companion might agree to see a film that is the second choice for both of you in order to spend an evening together. As long as everyone is satisfied with an outcome, it's accurate to describe it as a win-win solution. Although compromises can be a type of win-win outcome, the best solutions are ones in which all the parties get everything they want. Although a win-win approach sounds ideal, it is not always possible, or even appropriate.

Gender, culture, and managing conflicts

Some conflict is so destructive that it is toxic to the relationship, which is known as "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse."

1. Criticism consists of attacks on a person's character.
2. Defensiveness is protecting oneself by denying responsibility.
3. Contempt demeans the other individuals.
4. Stonewalling occurs when one person withdraws from the interaction, thus shutting down dialogue.

Conflict rituals are unacknowledged but are real repeating patterns of interlocking behavior.

Variables in conflict styles include gender and culture.

- I. There are small but measurable differences in the way women and men handle conflict, but the individual style of each communicator is more important than gender.
- II. The ways in which people resolve conflicts vary from one culture to another.

Conflict management in practice has guidelines to best approach win-win problem solving.

- a. Define your needs by deciding what you want or need.
- b. Share your needs with the other person when the time and place is suitable and you are at your best.
- c. Listen to the other person's needs.
 1. Generate possible solutions by brainstorming.
 2. Evaluate the possible solutions and choose the best one once all possibilities have been exhausted.
 3. Implement the solution.
 4. Follow up the solution to review the effects of the solution.

Summary



PART TWO OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

- I. This chapter explored several factors that help make interpersonal relationships satisfying or unsatisfying. We began by defining *Conflict* is an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from the other party in achieving their goals.
 - A. Expressed struggle captures the notion that conflict does not exist unless all the people involved know that the disagreement exists even if the expressed struggle is not verbalized.
 - B. Perceived incompatible goals is a situation where it seems as if the goals of those involved are mutually exclusive, but that is not always the case, as mutually satisfying answers can be agreed upon.
 - C. Perception of scarce resources occurs when people believe there are not enough resources, such as time, money, affection and space to go around.
 - D. Interdependence is another feature that captures the notion that people in a conflict are dependent upon each other.
 - E. Inevitability addresses that fact that conflicts are impossible to avoid; the challenge is to handle them effectively when they occur.

Communication climate is the emotional tone of a relationship as it is expressed in the messages being sent and received. We examined factors that contribute to positive and negative climates, learning that the underlying factor is the degree to which a person feels valued by others. We examined types of confirming and disconfirming messages, and then looked in detail at Gibb's categories of defensiveness-arousing and supportive behaviors. The second half of the chapter dealt with interpersonal conflict. We saw that conflict is a fact of life in every relationship and that the way conflicts are handled plays a major role in the quality of a relationship. There are five ways people can behave when faced with a conflict: nonassertive, directly aggressive, passive-aggressive, indirect, and assertive. Each of these approaches can be appropriate at times, but the chapter focused

on assertive communication skills because of their value and novelty for most communicators. We saw that conflict styles are affected by both gender and culture. There are four outcomes to conflicts: win–lose, lose–lose, compromise, and win–win. Win–win outcomes are often possible, if the parties possess the proper attitudes and skills. The final section of the chapter outlined the steps in win–win problem solving.

Question



Problem Solving in Your Life

1. Recall as many conflicts as possible that you have had in one relationship. Identify which approach best characterizes each one: win–lose, lose–lose, compromise, or win–win.
2. For each conflict, describe the consequences (for both you and the other person) of this approach.
3. Based on your analysis, decide for yourself how successful you and your partner are at managing conflicts. Describe any differences in approach that would result in more satisfying outcomes. Discuss what steps you and your partner could take to make these changes.

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