Chapter 11 Interpersonal Conflict and Conflict Management

Chapter objectives

11.1 Define interpersonal conflict and some of the reasons for conflict.

11.2 Describe the major principles that govern interpersonal conflict.

11.3 Describe the strategies for (and use them in your own communication) effective conflict management.

This chapter addresses one of the most important topics in the study of interpersonal communication. As you’ll see in this chapter, an understanding of interpersonal conflict and the skills for effective conflict management are essential to all forms of

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interpersonal interaction. After introducing a few foundation concepts, this chapter focuses on the nature and principles of conflict, the stages of conflict management, and the strategies for managing interpersonal conflict effectively.

**Preliminaries to Interpersonal Conflict**

 11.1 Define interpersonal conflict and some of the reasons for conflict. Before considering the stages and strategies of conflict management, we need to define exactly what we mean by interpersonal conflict, some of the myths surrounding this concept, and some of the issues around which conflict often centers.

**Definition of Interpersonal Conflict**

You want to go to the movies with your partner. Your partner wants to stay home. Your insisting on going to the movies interferes with your partner’s staying home, and your partner’s determination to stay home interferes with your going to the movies. Your goals are incompatible; if your goal is achieved, your partner’s goal is not. Conversely, if your partner’s goal is achieved, your goal is not. As this example illustrates, interpersonal conflict is disagreement between or among connected individuals—friends, lovers, colleagues, family members—who perceive their goals as incompatible (Cahn & Abigail, 2007; Folger, Poole, & Stutman, 2005; Hocker & Wilmot, 2007). More specifically, conflict occurs when people: • are interdependent (they’re connected in some significant way); what one person does has an impact or an effect on the other person. • are mutually aware that their goals are incompatible; if one person’s goal is achieved, then the other person’s goal cannot be achieved. For example, if one person wants to buy a new car and the other person wants to pay down the mortgage, there is conflict. Note that this situation would not pose a conflict if the couple had unlimited resources, in which case they could buy the car and pay down the mortgage. • perceive each other as interfering with the attainment of their own goals. For example, you may want to study, but your roommate may want to party; the attainment of either goal would interfere with the attainment of the other goal. One of the implications of this concept of interdependency is that the greater the interdependency, (1) the greater the number of issues on which conflict can center, and (2) the greater the impact of the conflict and the conflict management interaction on the individuals and on the relationship. As interdependency increases, so do breadth (the number of topics) and depth (the level to which topics are penetrated). When you think about it this way, it’s easy to appreciate how important understanding interpersonal conflict and mastering the strategies of effective conflict management are to your relationship life. The diagram in Figure 11.1 is designed to illustrate this idea.

Myths about Interpersonal Conflict

One of the problems many people have in dealing with conflict is that they may be operating on the basis of false assumptions about what conflict is and what it means. Think about your own assumptions about interpersonal and small-group conflict, which were probably derived from the communications you witnessed in your family and in your social interactions. For example, do you think the following are true or false?

1. Conflict is best avoided. Time will generally solve any problem; most difficulties blow over given time. 2. If two people experience relationship conflict, it means their relationship is in big trouble; conflict is a sign of a deeply troubled relationship.

3. Conflict damages an interpersonal relationship.

4. Conflict is destructive because it reveals our negative selves—our pettiness, our need to be in control, our unreasonable expectations.

5. In any conflict, there has to be a winner and a loser. Because goals are incompatible, someone has to win and someone has to lose.

Each of these statements is false and, as we’ll see in this chapter, these myths can easily interfere with your dealing effectively with conflict. To explain briefly: (1) Avoiding conflict prevents differences and disagreements from ever getting resolved. (2) Conflict is inevitable; conflict is a sign of disagreement, not necessarily major relationship problems. (3) Conflict, when it is appropriately managed, can actually improve a relationship. (4) Conflict can be constructive, especially when both individuals approach it logically and with consideration for each other. (5) Conflict does not mean that someone has to lose and someone has to win; both can win. It’s not so much the conflict that creates problems as the way in which you approach and deal with the conflict. Some ways of approaching conflict can resolve difficulties and differences, and can actually improve a relationship. Other ways can hurt the relationship; they can destroy self-esteem, create bitterness, and foster suspicion. Your task, therefore, is not to try to create relationships that will be free of conflict but rather to learn appropriate and productive ways of managing conflict so that neither person emerges a loser.

**Interpersonal Conflict Issues**

Interpersonal conflicts cover a wide range of issues (Canary, 2003). Such conflicts may focus on goals to be pursued (for example, parents and child disagree on what college the child should attend or what romantic partner he or she should get involved with); on the allocation of resources such as money or time (for example, partners differ on how to spend their money); on decisions to be made (for example, spouses argue about whether to save or splurge after one receives a bonus); or on behaviors that are considered appropriate or desirable by one person but inappropriate or undesirable by the other (for example, two people disagree over whether one of them was flirting or drinking or not working as hard on the relationship). In a study on the issues argued about by gay, lesbian, and heterosexual couples, researchers found that respondents identified six major issues that were almost identical for all couples (Kurdek, 1994). These issues are arranged here in order, with the

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first being the one mentioned most often. As you read this list, ask yourself how many of these issues lead to interpersonal conflict. • intimacy issues, such as affection and sex • power issues, such as excessive demands or possessiveness, lack of equality in the relationship, friends, and leisure time • personal flaws issues, such as drinking or smoking, personal grooming, and driving style • personal distance issues, such as frequent absence and heavy school or job commitments • social issues, such as politics and social policies, parents, and personal values • distrust issues, such as previous lovers and lying.

 According to the eHarmony.com website, nine issues are at the heart of couple conflicts: Free time, money, household responsibilities, politics, sex, children and pets, religion, jealousy, and stress. Another class of issues that create conflict is that of social allergens (Cunningham, 2009). Much like an allergen such as poison ivy irritates you physically, social allergens irritate you psychologically, emotionally, relationally. Physical allergies begin with a mild physical reaction and then, upon repeated contact, with reactions that are more and more severe. Similarly, a social allergen—for example, not calling when you’re going to be late—may at first be treated as a simple personality quirk. But when it occurs repeatedly over time, it’s no longer just a quirk; it’s a major annoyance. A social allergen is a personal habit of a friend or romantic partner that you find, say, annoying, unpleasant, distasteful, impolite, inconsiderate, uncouth, or just plain bothersome. Each person, of course, will have his or her own list of what constitutes social allergens. One researcher found that men and women identified different types of allergens. For example, the allergens that men complained about women included: using the silent treatment, bringing up old grievances, being too critical, and being stubborn. Women, on the other hand, complained about men forgetting dates of important events such as birthdays or anniversaries, not working hard enough, burping and flatulence, and looking too much at other women (Cunningham, 2009; Eccles, 2009). Here are a few additional ones mentioned in the many websites that discuss this issue: leaving wet towels on the bathroom floor; not capping the toothpaste tube; blowing one’s nose at the dinner table; commanding rather than asking; picking one’s nose; leaving toe nail clippings on the floor; and smoking, drinking, working on Facebook, or talking on the phone too much. In a study of same-sex and opposite-sex friends, the four issues most often argued about were shared living space or possessions, violations of friendship rules, the sharing of activities, and disagreement about ideas (Samter & Cupach, 1998). In large part, the same conflicts you experience in face-to-face relationships can also arise in electronic communication. Yet there are a few conflict issues that seem to be unique to electronic communication, whether via e-mail, on social networking sites such as Facebook or Google+, in blog postings, or on the phone. For the most part, such conflict results when people violate the rules of Internet courtesy, for example, sending commercial messages to those who didn’t request them often creates conflict. Sending someone unsolicited mail (spamming or spimming), repeatedly sending the same mail, or posting the same message in lots of newsgroups, even when the message is irrelevant to the focus of one or more groups, also create conflict. Putting out purposely incorrect information or outrageous viewpoints to watch other people correct you or get emotionally upset by your message (trolling) can obviously lead to conflict, though some see it as fun. Other potential causes of such conflict include ill-timed cell phone calls, calling someone at work just to chat, criticizing someone unfairly, or posting an unflattering photo on social network sites. In the workplace, conflicts are especially important because of their potential negative effects such as personnel leaving the job (necessitating new recruitment and retraining), low morale, and a

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lessening desire to perform at top efficiency. In workplace settings, the major sources of conflict among top managers revolved around the issue of executive responsibility and coordination. Other conflicts focused on differences in organizational objectives, on how resources were to be allocated, and on what constituted an appropriate management style (Morrill, 1992). Not surprisingly, social allergens are also represented in the workplace (Miller & Reznik, 2009). Workplace conflicts, according to another study, center on issues such as these (Psychometrics, 2010): • personality differences and resulting clashes, 86 percent • ineffective leadership, 73 percent • lack of openness, 67 percent • physical and emotional stress, 64 percent • differences in values and resulting clashes, 59 percent

**Principles of Interpersonal Conflict**

11.2 Describe the major principles that govern interpersonal conflict. The importance and influence of conflict in all interpersonal relationships can be best appreciated if we understand some fundamental principles of this particular form of interaction. Here we look at (1) the inevitability of conflict, (2) conflict’s positive and negative aspects, (3) conflict’s focus on content and/or on relationships, (4) differing styles of conflict and their consequences, (5) the influence of culture on conflict, and (6) the usefulness of viewing conflict management as a multistep process.

**Conflict Is Inevitable**

Conflict is part of every interpersonal relationship, whether between parents and children, brothers and sisters, friends, lovers, or coworkers. The very fact that people are different, have had different histories, and have different goals invariably produces differences. If the individuals are interdependent, as discussed earlier (see Figure 11.1), these differences may well lead to conflicts—and if so, the conflicts can focus on a wide variety of issues and can be extremely personal. And, of course, some people have greater tolerance for disagreement. Consequently they are more apt to let things slide and not become emotionally upset or hostile than are those with little tolerance for disagreement (Teven, Richmond, & McCroskey, 1998; Wrench, McCroskey, & Richmond, 2008).

**Conflict Can Occur in All Communication Forms**

 In large part, the same conflicts you experience in face-to-face relationships can also arise in online communication. Yet there are a few conflict issues that seem to be unique to online communication, whether in e-mail, in social networking sites such as Facebook or MySpace, or in blog postings. For the most part, online conflict results when people violate the rules of politeness. For example, sending commercial messages to those who didn’t request them often creates conflict, or sending a message to an entire listserv when it’s relevant to only one member may annoy members who expect to receive messages relevant to the entire group and not personal exchanges between two people. Sending someone unsolicited mail (spamming or spimming), repeatedly sending the same mail, or posting the same message in lots of newsgroups (especially when the message is irrelevant to the focus of one or more groups) can also create conflict. Putting out purposefully incorrect information or outrageous viewpoints to watch other people correct you or get emotionally upset by your message (trolling) can obviously lead to conflict, though some see it as fun. Other potential causes of online conflict are ill-timed cell phone calls, calling someone at work just to chat, or criticizing someone unfairly or posting an unflattering photo on social network sites.

**Conflict Can Have Negative and Positive Effects**

Even though interpersonal conflict is inevitable, the way you deal with conflict is crucial because conflict can have both negative and positive effects, depending on how it is handled. Negative effects Among the disadvantages of conflict is that it often leads to increased negative feelings. Many conflicts involve unfair fighting methods and focus largely on hurting the other person. If this happens, negative feelings are sure to increase. Conflict may also deplete energy better spent on other areas, especially when unproductive conflict strategies are used. At times, conflict may lead you to close yourself off from the other individual. When you hide your feelings from your partner, you prevent meaningful communication and interaction; this, in turn, creates barriers to intimacy. Because the need for intimacy is so strong, one possible outcome is that one or both parties may seek intimacy elsewhere. This often leads to further conflict, mutual hurt, and resentment—all of which add heavily to the costs carried by the relationship. As the costs increase, the rewards may become more difficult to exchange. Here, then, is a situation in which costs increase and rewards decrease, a scenario that often results in relationship deterioration and eventual dissolution. Positive effects Among the advantages of conflict is that it forces you to examine a problem and work toward a potential solution. If you use productive conflict strategies, your relationship is likely to become stronger, healthier, and more satisfying than it was before. Even angry discussions in which you voice your unwillingness to accept certain behaviors can be beneficial (McNulty & Russell, 2010). Conflict often prevents hostilities and resentments from festering. Say that you’re annoyed at your partner, who comes home from work and then talks on the phone with colleagues for two hours instead of giving that time to you. If you say nothing, your annoyance is likely to grow. Further, by saying nothing you implicitly approve of such behavior, so it’s likely that the phone calls will continue. Through your conflict and its resolution, you each let your needs be known: your partner needs to review the day’s work to gain assurance that it’s been properly completed, and you have a need for your partner’s attention. If you both can appreciate the legitimacy of these needs, then you stand a good chance of finding workable solutions. Perhaps your partner can make the phone calls after your attention needs are met. Perhaps you can delay your need for attention until your partner gets closure about work. Perhaps you can learn to provide for your partner’s closure needs and in doing so get your own attention needs met. Again, you have win–win solutions; each of you has your needs met. Consider, too, that when you try to resolve conflict within an interpersonal relationship, you’re saying that the relationship is worth the effort; otherwise, you’d walk away. Although there may be exceptions—as when you confront conflict to save face or to gratify some ego need—confronting a conflict often indicates concern, commitment, and a desire to protect and preserve the relationship.

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**Conflict Can Focus on Content and/or Relationship Issues**

content conflict centers on objects, events, and persons in the world that are usually external to the people involved in the conflict. These include the millions of issues that you argue and fight about every day—the merits of a particular movie, what to watch on television, the fairness of the last examination, who should get promoted, the way to spend your savings. Relationship conflicts are equally numerous and are concerned with the relationships between the individuals—with issues such as who’s in charge, the equality or lack of it in the relationship, and who has the right to establish rules of behavior. Examples of relationship conflicts include those involving a younger brother who does not obey his older brother, two partners who each want an equal say in making vacation plans, or a mother and daughter who each want to have the final word concerning the daughter’s lifestyle. Relationship conflicts are often hidden and disguised as content conflicts. Thus, a conflict over where you should vacation may, on the content level, center on the advantages and disadvantages of Mexico versus Hawaii. On a relationship level, however, it may center on who has the greater right to select the place to vacation, who should win the argument, or who is the decision maker in the relationship.

**Conflict Is Influenced by Culture and Gender**

As is true with all communication processes, conflict is influenced by the culture of the participants—and especially by their beliefs and values about conflict—and by their gender. cultuRal iNflueNces Culture seems to influence the topics people fight about, the nature of their conflict, the conflict strategies they use, and the norms of the organization regarding conflict. Topics Culture influences the topics people fight about as well as what are considered appropriate and inappropriate ways of dealing with conflict. For example, cohabiting 18-year-olds are more likely to have conflict with their parents over their living style if they live in the United States than if they live in Sweden, where cohabitation is much more accepted. Similarly, male infidelity is more likely to cause conflict among American couples than among southern European couples. The topics of conflicts also depend on whether the culture is collectivist or individualist. In collectivist cultures, conflicts are more likely to center on violations of collective or group norms and values. Conversely, in individualist cultures, conflicts are more likely to come up when individual norms are violated (Ting-Toomey, 1985). Nature of Conflict Cultures also differ in how they define what constitutes conflict. For example, in some cultures it’s quite common for women to be referred to negatively and to be seen as less than equal. To most people in the United States, this would constitute a clear basis for conflict. To some Japanese women, however, this isn’t uncommon and isn’t perceived as abusive (New York Times, February 11, 1996, pp. 1, 12). Further, Americans and Japanese differ in their views of the aim or purpose of conflict. The Japanese see conflicts and their resolution in terms of compromise; Americans, on the other hand, see conflict in terms of winning (Gelfand, Nishii, Holcombe, Dyer, Ohbuchi, & Fukuno, 2001). African Americans and European Americans engage in conflict in very different ways (Hecht, Jackson, & Ribeau, 2003; Kochman, 1981). The issues that cause and aggravate conflict, the conflict strategies that are expected and accepted, and the attitudes toward conflict vary from one group to the other. Conflict Strategies Each culture seems to teach its members different views of conflict strategies (Tardiff, 2001).

geNDeR iNflueNces Research finds significant gender differences in interpersonal conflict (Krolokke & Sorensen, 2006; Wood, 2010). For example, men are more apt to withdraw from a conflict situation than are women. It’s been argued that this may be because men become more psychologically and physiologically aroused during conflict (and retain this heightened level of arousal much longer) than do women, and so may try to distance themselves and withdraw from the conflict to prevent further arousal (Goleman, 1995b; Gottman & Carrere, 1994). Another position argues that men withdraw because the culture has taught men to avoid conflict. Still another claims that withdrawal is an expression of power. Women, on the other hand, want to get closer to the conflict; they want to talk about it and resolve it. Even adolescents reveal these differences. In research on boys and girls ages 11 to 17, boys withdrew more than girls (Heasley, Babbitt, & Burbach, 1995; Lindeman, Harakka, & Keltikangas-Jarvinen, 1997). Other research has found that women are more emotional and men are more logical when they argue. Women have been defined as conflict “feelers” and men as conflict “thinkers” (Sorenson, Hawkins, & Sorenson, 1995). Another difference is that women are more apt to reveal their negative feelings than are men (Canary, Cupach, & Messman, 1995; Schaap, Buunk, & Kerkstra, 1988). It should be mentioned, however, that some research fails to support these stereotypical gender differences in conflict style—the differences that cartoons, situation comedies, and films portray so readily and so clearly. For example, several studies dealing with both college students and men and women in business found no significant differences in the ways men and women engage in conflict (Canary & Hause, 1993; Gottman & Levenson, 1999; Canary, Cupach, & Messman, 1995; Gamble & Gamble, 2014).

**Conflict Management Is a Multistep Process**

Conflicts are managed in various ways, depending on the specific conflict issue and the individuals involved. Nevertheless, several steps or stages in the conflict management process seem to be helpful to most, if not all, interpersonal conflicts. steP 1. set the stage First, try to fight in private. If the conflict takes place on some social media site, try to fight offline. When you air your conflicts in front of others, you create a variety of other problems. You may not be willing to be totally honest when third parties are present or when others are reading your posts. You may feel you have to save face and therefore must win the fight at all costs. This may lead you to use strategies to win the argument rather than to resolve the conflict. You may become so absorbed by the image that others will have of you that you forget you have a relationship problem that needs to be resolved. You also run the risk of embarrassing your partner in front of others, and this embarrassment may create resentment and hostility. And on social media, you run an additional risk of having your posts circulated and even quoted back to you long after the conflict is settled. Be sure you’re each ready to fight. Although conflicts arise at the most inopportune times, you can choose the time to resolve them. Confronting your partner when she or he comes home after a hard day of work may not be the right time for resolving a conflict. Make sure you’re both relatively free of other problems and ready to deal with the conflict at hand. Fight about problems that can be solved. Fighting about past behaviors or about family members or situations over which you have no control solves nothing; instead, it creates additional difficulties. Any attempt at resolution will fail because the problems are incapable of being solved. Often such conflicts are concealed attempts at expressing frustration or dissatisfaction.

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steP 2. Define the conflict Once you’ve set the stage, you need to define the conflict. You need to know what you’re fighting about. Sometimes people in a relationship become so hurt and angry that they lash out at the other person just to vent their own frustration. The problem at the center of the conflict (for example, the uncapped toothpaste tube) is merely an excuse to express anger. Any attempt to resolve this “problem” will be doomed to failure because the problem addressed is not what is causing the conflict. Instead, the underlying hostility, anger, and frustration need to be addressed. Here are several techniques to keep in mind. • Define both content and relationship issues. Define the obvious content issues (who should do the dishes, who should take the kids to school) as well as the underlying relationship issues (who has been avoiding household responsibilities, whose time is more valuable). • Define the problem in specific terms. Conflict defined in the abstract is difficult to deal with and resolve. It’s one thing for a husband to say that his wife is “cold and unfeeling” and quite another to say that she does not call him at the office, kiss him when he comes home, or hold his hand when they’re at a party. These behaviors can be agreed on and dealt with, but the abstract “cold and unfeeling” remains elusive. • Focus on the present. Avoid gunnysacking (a term derived from the large burlap bag called a gunnysack)—the practice of storing up grievances so they may be unloaded at another time. Often, when one person gunnysacks, the other person gunnysacks; for example, the birthdays you forgot and the times you arrived late for dinner are all thrown at you. The result is two people dumping their stored-up grievances on each other, with no real attention to the present problem. As you can imagine, gunnysacking is made even easier by social media where photos, posts, and comments can be stored for later unloading. • Empathize. Try to understand the nature of the conflict from the other person’s point of view. Why is your partner disturbed that you’re not doing the dishes? Why is your neighbor complaining about taking the kids to school? Once you have empathically understood the other person’s feelings, validate those feelings when appropriate. If your partner is hurt or angry and you believe such feelings are legitimate and justified, say so: “You have a right to be angry; I shouldn’t have said what I did about your mother. I’m sorry. But I still don’t want to go on vacation with her.” In expressing validation, you’re not necessarily expressing agreement; you’re merely stating that your partner has feelings that you recognize as legitimate. • Avoid mind reading. Don’t try to read the other person’s mind. Ask questions to make sure you understand the problem as the other person is experiencing it. Ask directly and simply: “Why are you insisting that I take the dog out now, when I have to call three clients before nine o’clock?”

steP 3. identify your goals Once you’ve defined the problem, you need to identify the goals. Ask yourself what you want to accomplish in this conflict management interaction. If you look at an interpersonal conflict as an opportunity to resolve differences and disagreements, it will be easy to identify your goals. Do you want to avoid breaking up? Do you want to have greater freedom to see others? Do you want to kiss and make up? These goals help you move to the next step.

steP 4. identify and evaluate your choices In most conflicts you have choices about how you might consider resolving the problems. Identify and evaluate these choices. For example, you might brainstorm by yourself or with your partner. Try not to inhibit or censor yourself or your partner as you generate these potential solutions. Once you have proposed a variety of choices, look especially for those that will enable each party to win—to get something he or she wants. Avoid win–lose solutions, in which one person wins and one loses. Such outcomes cause difficulty for the relationship by engendering frustration and resentment.

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Carefully weigh the costs and the rewards that each choice entails. Most choices involve costs to one or both parties. Seek solutions in which the costs and the rewards are evenly shared. Using a specific example will help us work through the remaining steps in the conflict management process. In this example, the conflict revolves around Pat’s not wanting to socialize with Chris’s friends. Chris is devoted to these friends, but Pat actively dislikes them. Chris thinks they’re wonderful and exciting; Pat thinks they’re unpleasant and boring. Among the choices that Pat and Chris might identify are these: 1. Chris should not interact with these friends anymore. 2. Pat should interact with Chris’s friends. 3. Chris should see these friends without Pat. Clearly choices 1 and 2 are win–lose solutions. In choice 1, Pat wins and Chris loses; in choice 2, Chris wins and Pat loses. Choice 3 has some possibilities. Both might win and neither must necessarily lose. This potential choice, then, needs to be looked at more closely. steP 5. act oN the choseN choice You might want first to “act” on the choice mentally. How does it feel now? How will it feel tomorrow? Are you comfortable with it? In our example, will Pat be comfortable with Chris’s socializing with these friends alone? Some of Chris’s friends are attractive; will this cause difficulty for Pat and Chris’s relationship? Will Chris give people too much to gossip about? Will Chris feel guilty? Will Chris enjoy seeing these friends without Pat? Second, act on the choice. Put the chosen choice into operation (as a temporary measure, if you prefer).

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steP 6. evaluate the choice The next step is to evaluate the choice once it has been put into operation. How did it work? Did this choice help resolve the conflict? Is the situation better now than it was before? Pat and Chris now need to share their perceptions of this possible solution. Would they be comfortable with this solution on a monthly basis? Is the solution worth the costs each will pay? Are the costs and rewards evenly distributed? Might other solutions be more effective? Critical-thinking pioneer Edward deBono (1987) suggests that in analyzing problems, you use six “thinking hats” as a way of seeking different perspectives. With each hat, you look at the problem from a different angle. • The fact hat focuses attention on the facts and figures that bear on the problem. For example, how can Pat learn more about the rewards that Chris gets from the friends? How can Chris learn why Pat doesn’t like these great friends? • The feeling hat focuses attention on the emotional responses to the problem. How does Pat feel when Chris goes out with these friends? How does Chris feel when Pat refuses to meet them? • The negative argument hat asks you to become the devil’s advocate. How may this relationship deteriorate if Chris continues seeing these friends without Pat or if Pat resists interacting with Chris’s friends? • The positive benefits hat asks you to look at the upside. What are the opportunities that Chris’s seeing friends without Pat might yield? What benefits might Pat and Chris get from this new arrangement? • The creative new idea hat focuses on new ways of looking at the problem. In what other ways can Pat and Chris look at this problem? What other possible solutions might they consider? • The control of thinking hat helps you analyze what you’re doing; it asks you to reflect on your own thinking. Have Pat and Chris adequately defined the problem? Are they focusing too much on insignificant issues? Have they given enough attention to possible negative effects?

steP 7. accePt oR Reject the choice If you accept the chosen choice, you’re ready to put it into more permanent operation. Let’s say that Pat is actually quite happy with the solution. Pat was able to use the evening to visit college friends. The next time Chris goes out with the friends Pat doesn’t like, Pat intends to go out with some friends from college. Chris feels pretty good about seeing friends without Pat. Chris explains that they have both decided to see their friends separately and both are comfortable with this decision. If, however, either Pat or Chris feels unhappy with this solution, they will have to revisit the choices, and perhaps redefine the problem and seek other ways to manage it. steP 8. WRaP it uP Even after the conflict is resolved, there is still work to be done. Often, after one conflict is supposedly settled, another conflict emerges—because, for example, one person feels that he or she has been harmed and needs to retaliate and take revenge in order to restore a sense of self-worth (Kim & Smith, 1993). So it’s especially important that the conflict be resolved and not be allowed to generate other, perhaps more significant conflicts. Learn from the conflict and from the process you went through in trying to resolve it. For example, can you identify the fight strategies that merely aggravated the situation? Do you or your partner need a cooling-off period? Can you tell when minor issues are going to escalate into major arguments? Does avoidance make matters worse? What issues are particularly disturbing and likely to cause difficulties? Can they be avoided? Keep the conflict in perspective. Be careful not to blow it out of proportion to the extent that you begin to define your relationship in terms of conflict. Avoid the tendency to see disagreement as inevitably leading to major blowups. In most relationships conflicts actually occupy a very small percentage of the couple’s time, and yet in recollection they often loom extremely large. Also, don’t allow the conflict to undermine your own or your partner’s self-esteem. Don’t view yourself, your partner, or your relationship as a failure just because you had an argument or even lots of arguments. Attack your negative feelings. Negative feelings frequently arise after an interpersonal conflict. Most often they arise because one or both parties used unfair fight strategies to undermine the other person—for example, personal rejection, manipulation, or force. Resolve to avoid such unfair tactics in the future, but at the same time let go of guilt and blame toward yourself and your partner. If you think it would help, discuss these feelings with your partner or even a therapist. Apologize for anything you did wrong. Your partner should do likewise; after all, both parties are usually responsible for the conflict (Coleman, 2002). Increase the exchange of rewards and cherishing behaviors to demonstrate your positive feelings and to show you’re over the conflict and want the relationship to survive and flourish.

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**Conflict Management Strategies**

11.3 Describe the strategies for (and use them in your own communication) effective conflict management. In managing conflict you can choose from a variety of strategies, which we will explore below. First, however, realize that the strategies you choose will be influenced by a variety of factors, such as (1) the goals to be achieved, (2) your emotional state, (3) your cognitive assessment of the situation, (4) your personality and communication competence, and (5) your family history (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002). Understanding these factors may help you select strategies that are more appropriate and more effective. Research finds that using productive conflict strategies can have lots of beneficial effects, whereas using inappropriate strategies may be linked to poorer psychological health (Neff & Harter, 2002; Weitzman, 2001; Weitzman & Weitzman, 2000). • Goals. The short-term and long-term goals you wish to achieve influence what strategies seem appropriate to you. If you merely want to salvage this evening’s date, you may want to simply “give in” and basically ignore the difficulty. On the other hand, if you want to build a long-term relationship, you may want to analyze the cause of the problem fully and to seek strategies that enable both parties to win. • Emotional state. Your feelings influence your strategies. You’re unlikely to select the same strategies when you’re sad as when you’re angry. You choose different strategies when you’re seeking to apologize than when you’re looking for revenge. • Cognitive assessment. Your attitudes and beliefs about what is fair and equitable influence your readiness to acknowledge the fairness in the other person’s position. Your own assessment of who (if anyone) is the cause of the problem also influences your conflict style. You may also assess the likely effects of your various options. For example, what do you risk if you fight with your boss by using blame or personal rejection? Do you risk alienating your teenager if you use force? • Personality and communication competence. If you’re shy and unassertive, you may be more likely to try to avoid conflict than to fight actively. If you’re extroverted and have a strong desire to state your position, then you may be more likely to fight actively and argue forcefully. And, of course, some people have greater tolerance for disagreement and consequently are more apt to let things slide and not become emotionally upset or hostile than are those with little tolerance for disagreement (Teven, Richmond, & McCroskey, 1998; Wrench, McCroskey, & Richmond, 2008). • Family history. The topics you choose to fight about, and perhaps your tendencies to obsess or to forget about interpersonal conflicts, are likely influenced by your family history and the way conflicts were handled as you grew up. Awareness of these influences is a first step in reversing any negative tendencies. The following discussion identifies strategies, in addition to those you’ve already encountered, detailing both the unproductive and destructive strategies that you’ll want to avoid and the productive and constructive strategies that you’ll want to use. It’s important to see at the outset that the strategic choices you make (and do realize that you do have choices, something people frequently try to deny) greatly affect both the specific interpersonal conflict and your relationship as a whole. For example, refusal messages, insults, accusations, and commands are likely to lead to conflict as well as to add to existing conflicts, delaying and perhaps preventing effective conflict management (Canary, Cody, & Manusov, 2003). Before reading about the various conflict management strategies, examine your interpersonal conflict behavior by responding to the following statements with true (T) if this is a generally accurate description of your interpersonal conflict behavior and false (F) if the statement is a generally inaccurate description of your behavior. \_\_\_\_ 1. I strive to seek solutions that benefit both of us. \_\_\_\_ 2. I look for solutions that give me what I want. \_\_\_\_ 3. I confront conflict situations as they arise. \_\_\_\_ 4. I avoid conflict situations as best I can. \_\_\_\_ 5. My messages are basically descriptive of the events leading up to the conflict. \_\_\_\_ 6. My messages are often judgmental. \_\_\_\_ 7. I take into consideration the face needs of the other person. \_\_\_\_ 8. I advance the strongest arguments I can find, even if these attack the other person. \_\_\_\_ 9. I center my arguments on issues rather than on personalities. \_\_\_\_ 10. I use messages that may attack a person’s self-image if this helps me win the argument. These questions were designed to sensitize you to some of the conflict strategies to be discussed in this section of the chapter. As you’ll see, if you answered true (T) to the odd-numbered statements (1, 3, 5, 7, and 9) and false (F) to the even-numbered statements (2, 4, 6, 8, and 10), you’d be following the guidelines offered by communication researchers and theorists. As you think about your responses and read the text discussion, ask yourself what you can do to improve your own conflict management skills.

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**Win–Lose and Win–Win Strategies**

As indicated in the discussion of conflict styles, when you look at interpersonal conflict in terms of winning and losing, you get four basic types: (1) A wins, B loses; (2) A loses, B wins; (3) A loses, B loses; and (4) A wins, B wins. Obviously, win–win solutions are the most desirable. Perhaps the most important reason is that win–win solutions lead to mutual satisfaction and prevent the resentment that win–lose strategies often engender. Looking for and developing win–win strategies makes the next conflict less unpleasant; it becomes easier to see the conflict as “solving a problem” rather than as a “fight.” Still another benefit of win–win solutions is that they promote mutual face-saving; both parties can feel good about themselves. Finally, people are more likely to abide by the decisions reached in a win–win outcome than they are in win–lose or lose–lose resolutions. Win–win solutions, in which you and the other person both win, are almost always better. Too often, however, we fail even to consider the possibility of win–win solutions and what they might be. Take an interpersonal example: Let’s say that I want to spend our money on a new car (my old one is unreliable), but you want to spend it on a vacation (you’re exhausted and feel the need for a rest). Through our conflict and its resolution, ideally, we learn what each really wants and may then be able to figure out a way for each of us to get what we want. I might accept a good used car, and you might accept a less expensive vacation. Or we might buy a used car and take an inexpensive road trip. Each of these win–win solutions will satisfy both of us; each person wins, both of us get what we wanted.

**Avoidance and Active Fighting Strategies**

avoidance of conflict may involve actual physical flight, for example, leaving the scene of the conflict (walking out of the apartment or going to another part of the office), falling asleep, or blasting the stereo to drown out all conversation. It may also take the form of emotional or intellectual avoidance, whereby you leave the conflict psychologically by not dealing with the issues raised. As avoidance increases, relationship satisfaction decreases (Meeks, Hendrick, & Hendrick, 1998). Sometimes avoidance is a response to demands—a conflict pattern known as demand–withdrawal. Here one person makes demands and the other person, unwilling to accede to the demands, withdraws from the interaction (Canary, Cupach, & Messman, 1995; Guerrero, Andersen, & Afifi, 2007; Sagrestano, Heavey, & Christensen, 2006). This pattern is obviously unproductive, but either individual can easily break it—either by not making demands or by not withdrawing and instead participating actively in conflict management. Although avoidance is generally an unproductive approach, this does not mean that taking time out to cool off is not a useful first strategy. Sometimes it is. When conflict is waged through e-mail or some social network site, for example, this is an easy-to-use and often effective strategy. By delaying your response until you’ve had time to think things out more logically and calmly, you’ll be better able to respond constructively, to address possible resolutions to the conflict, and get the relationship back to a less hostile stage. And there is some research that shows that as couples age, although they continue to experience the demand-withdrawal pattern, they avoid the conflict rather than confront it (Holley, Haase, & Levenson, 2013). And it seems to work for them. Nonnegotiation is a special type of avoidance. Here you refuse to direct any attention to managing the conflict or to listen to the other person’s argument. At times, nonnegotiation takes the form of hammering away at your own point of view until the other person gives in. Another unproductive conflict strategy is the use of silencers. silencers are conflict techniques that literally silence the other individual. Among the wide variety of silencers that exist, one frequently used technique is crying. When a person is unable to deal with a conflict or when winning seems unlikely, he or she may cry and thus silence the other person. Another silencer consists of feigning extreme emotionalism—yelling and screaming and pretending to be losing control. Still another is developing some physical reaction—headaches and shortness of breath are probably the most popular. One of the major problems with silencers is that you can never be certain whether they’re strategies to win the argument or real physical reactions to which you should pay attention. Either way, however, the conflict remains unexamined and unresolved. Instead of avoiding the issues or resorting to nonnegotiation or silencers, consider taking an active role in your interpersonal conflicts. If you wish to resolve conflicts, you need to confront them actively. Involve yourself on both sides of the communication exchange. Be an active participant as a speaker and as a listener; voice your own feelings and listen carefully to your partner’s feelings. An important part of active fighting involves taking responsibility for your thoughts and feelings. For example, when you disagree with your partner or find fault with her or his behavior, take responsibility for these feelings. Say, for example, “I disagree with...” or “I don’t like it when you....” Avoid statements that deny your responsibility, such as “Everybody thinks you’re wrong about. . .” or “Chris thinks you shouldn’t. . . .”

**Force and Talk Strategies**

When confronted with conflict, many people prefer not to deal with the issues but rather to force their position on the other person. The force may be emotional or physical. In either case, however, the issues are avoided, and the person who “wins” is the one who exerts the most force. This is the technique of warring nations, children, and even some normally sensible adults. It seems also to be the technique of those who are dissatisfied with the power they perceive themselves to have in a relationship (Ronfeldt, Kimerling, & Arias, 1998). In one study, more than 50 percent of single and married couples reported that they had experienced physical violence in their relationship. If we add symbolic violence (for example, threatening to hit the other person or throwing something), the percentages are above 60 percent for singles and above 70 percent for married people (Marshall & Rose, 1987). In other research, 47 percent of a sample of 410 college students reported some experience with violence in a dating relationship (Deal & Wampler, 1986). In most cases, the violence was reciprocal—each person in the relationship used violence.

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The only real alternative to force is talk. For example, the qualities of openness, positiveness, and empathy are suitable starting points. In addition, be sure to listen actively and openly. This may be especially difficult in conflict situations; tempers may run high, and you may find yourself being attacked or at least disagreed with. Here are some suggestions for talking and listening more effectively in the conflict situation: • Act the role of the listener. Also, think as a listener. Turn off the television, stereo, or computer; face the other person. Devote your total attention to what the other person is saying. Make sure you understand what the person is saying and feeling. One way to make sure is obviously to ask questions. Another way is to paraphrase what the other person is saying and ask for confirmation: “You feel that if we pooled our money and didn’t have separate savings accounts, the relationship would be more equitable. Is that the way you feel?” • Express your support or empathy for what the other person is saying and feeling: “I can understand how you feel. I know I control the finances and that can create a feeling of inequality.” If appropriate, indicate your agreement: “You’re right to be disturbed.” • State your thoughts and feelings on the issue as objectively as you can; if you disagree with what the other person said, then say so: “My problem is that, when we did have equal access to the finances, you ran up so many bills that we still haven’t recovered. To be honest with you, I’m worried the same thing will happen again.”

**Face-Attacking and Face-Enhancing Strategies: Politeness in Conflict**

face-attacking strategies are those that attack a person’s positive face (for example, comments that criticize the person’s contribution to a relationship or any of the person’s abilities) or a person’s negative face (for example, making demands on a person’s time or resources or comments that attack the person’s autonomy). faceenhancing strategies are those that support and confirm a person’s positive (praise, a pat on the back, a sincere smile) or negative face (giving the person space and asking rather than demanding), for example. One popular but destructive face-attacking strategy is beltlining (Bach & Wyden, 1968). Much like fighters in a ring, each of us has a “beltline” (here, an emotional one). When you hit below this emotional beltline, you can inflict serious injury. When you hit above the belt, however, the person is able to absorb the blow. With most interpersonal relationships, especially those of long standing, you know where the beltline is. You know, for example, that to hit Kristen or Matt with the inability to have children is to hit below the belt. You know that to hit Jack or Jill with the failure to get a permanent job is to hit below the belt. This type of face-attacking strategy causes all persons involved added problems. Another such face-attacking strategy is blame. Instead of focusing on a solution to a problem, some members try to affix blame on the other person. Whether true or not, blaming is unproductive; it diverts attention away from the problem and from its potential solution and it creates resentment that is likely to be responded to with additional resentment. The conflict then spirals into personal attacks, leaving the individuals and the relationship worse off than before the conflict was ever addressed. Strategies that enhance a person’s self-image and that acknowledge a person’s autonomy will not only be polite, they’re likely to be more effective than strategies that attack a person’s self-image and deny a person’s autonomy. Even when you get what you want, it’s wise to help the other person retain positive face because it makes it less likely that future conflicts will arise (Donahue & Kolt, 1992).

Instead of face-attacking, try face-enhancing strategies: • Use messages that enhance a person’s self-image. • Use messages that acknowledge a person’s autonomy. • Compliment the other person even in the midst of a conflict. • Make few demands; respect another’s time; and give the other person space, especially in times of conflict. • Keep blows to areas above the belt. • Avoid blaming the other person. • Express respect for the other’s point of view, even when it differs greatly from your own.

**Verbal Aggressiveness and Argumentativeness Strategies**

An especially interesting perspective on conflict has emerged from work on verbal aggressiveness and argumentativeness (Infante, 1988; Infante & Rancer, 1982; Infante & Wigley, 1986; Rancer & Avtgis, 2006). Understanding these concepts will help you understand some of the reasons things go wrong and some of the ways in which you can use conflict actually to improve your relationships. veRbal aggRessiveNess verbal aggressiveness is an unproductive conflict strategy, in which one person tries to win an argument by inflicting psychological pain and attacking the other person’s self-concept. It’s a type of disconfirmation (and the opposite of confirmation) in that it seeks to discredit the individual’s view of self. Aggressiveness: • is destructive; the outcomes are negative in a variety of communication situations (interpersonal, group, organizational, family, and intercultural). • leads to relationship dissatisfaction because it attacks another’s self-concept. • may lead to relationship violence. • damages organizational life and demoralizes workers on varied levels. • prevents meaningful parent–child communication and makes corporal punishment more likely. • decreases the user’s credibility, in part because it’s seen as a tactic to discredit the opponent rather than address the argument. • decreases the user’s power of persuasion. Character attack, perhaps because it’s extremely effective in inflicting psychological pain, is the most popular tactic of verbal aggressiveness. Other tactics include attacking the person’s abilities, background, and physical appearance; cursing; teasing; ridiculing; threatening; swearing; and using various nonverbal emblems (Infante, Sabourin, Rudd, & Shannon, 1990). Some researchers have argued that “unless aroused by verbal aggression, a hostile disposition remains latent in the form of unexpressed anger” (Infante, Chandler, & Rudd, 1989). There is some evidence to show that people in violent relationships are more often verbally aggressive than people in nonviolent relationships (Sutter & Martin, 1998). Because verbal aggressiveness does not help to resolve conflicts, results in loss of credibility for the person using it, and actually increases the credibility of the target of the aggressiveness, you may wonder why people act aggressively (Infante, Hartley, Martin, Higgins, et al., 1992; Infante, Riddle, Horvath, & Tumlin, 1992; Schrodt, 2003). Communicating with an affirming style (for example, with smiles, a pleasant facial expression, touching, physical closeness, eye contact, nodding, warm and sincere voice, vocal variety) leads others to perceive less verbal aggression in an interaction than communicating with a nonaffirming style. The assumptions people seem to make is that if your actions are affirming, then your messages are also, and if your actions are nonaffirming, then your messages are also (Infante, Rancer, & Jordan, 1996). aRgumeNtativeNess Contrary to popular usage, the term argumentativeness refers to a quality to be cultivated rather than avoided. Argumentativeness is your willingness to argue for a point of view, your tendency to speak your mind on significant issues. It’s the preferred alternative to verbal aggressiveness (Infante & Rancer, 1996; Rancer & Atvgis, 2006). Among the distinguishing characteristics of argumentativeness that separate it from aggressiveness are that it: • Is constructive; the outcomes are positive in a variety of communication situations (interpersonal, group, organizational, family, and intercultural). • Leads to relationship satisfaction.

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Viewpoints Cultures vary widely in the extent to which their members are verbally aggressive (Croucher, 2013). They also vary in their responses to physical and verbal abuse that often follows. In some Asian and Hispanic cultures, for example, the fear of losing face or embarrassing the family is so great that people prefer not to report or reveal abuses. When looking over statistics, it may appear at first that little violence occurs in the families of certain cultures. Yet we know from research that wife beating is quite common in India, Taiwan, and Iran, for example (Counts, Brown, & Campbell, 1992; Hatfield & Rapson, 1996). In much of the United States and in many other cultures as well, such abuse would not be tolerated, no matter who was embarrassed or insulted.

• May prevent relationship violence, especially in domestic relationships. • Enhances organizational life; for example, subordinates prefer supervisors who encourage argumentativeness. • Enhances parent–child communication and enables parents to gain greater compliance. • Increases the user’s credibility; argumentatives are seen as trustworthy, committed, and dynamic. • Increases the user’s power of persuasion in varied communication contexts; argumentatives are more likely to be seen as leaders.

stRategies foR cultivatiNg aRgumeNtativeNess The following are some suggestions for cultivating argumentativeness. Ideally, most of these guidelines are already part of your interpersonal behavior (Infante, 1988; Rancer & Avtgis, 2006). If any are not part of your conflict behavior, consider how you can integrate them. • Treat disagreements as objectively as possible. Avoid assuming that, because someone takes issue with your position or your interpretation, he or she is attacking you as a person. • Avoid attacking the other person (rather than the person’s arguments), even if this would give you a tactical advantage. Center your arguments on issues rather than personalities. • Reaffirm the other person’s sense of competence. Compliment the other person as appropriate. • Avoid interrupting. Allow the other person to state her or his position fully before you respond. • Stress equality, and stress the similarities that you have with the other person (see the Understanding Interpersonal Skills box). Stress your areas of agreement before attacking the disagreements. • Express interest in the other person’s position, attitude, and point of view. • Avoid presenting your arguments too emotionally. Avoid using a loud voice or interjecting vulgar expressions, which prove offensive and eventually ineffective. • Allow the other person to save face. Never humiliate the other person. Argue politely and respectfully. Table 11.2 summarizes these five conflict management strategies.

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\_\_\_\_ 1. I strive to seek solutions that benefit both of us.

\_\_\_\_ 2. I look for solutions that give me what I want.

 \_\_\_\_ 3. I confront conflict situations as they arise.

\_\_\_\_ 4. I avoid conflict situations as best I can.

\_\_\_\_ 5. My messages are basically descriptive of the events leading up to the conflict

. \_\_\_\_ 6. My messages are often judgmental.

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\_\_\_\_ 7. I take into consideration the face needs of the other person.

 \_\_\_\_ 8. I advance the strongest arguments I can find, even if these attack the other person.

\_\_\_\_ 9. I center my arguments on issues rather than on personalities.

\_\_\_\_ 10. I use messages that may attack a person’s self-image if this helps me win the argument.

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