

# 13

## MANAGING CONFLICT

Difficulties are meant to rouse, not discourage.  
The human spirit is to grow strong by conflict.

—William Ellery Channing, U.S. abolitionist and Unitarian clergyman

The world seems to be full of conflict. Conflict is also pervasive at the corporate level, as demonstrated by the frequency of mergers, acquisitions, and unfriendly takeovers. Within companies, tensions can also run high. Workplace violence is the number one cause of death on the job for women and the number two cause for men. And the incidence of workplace violence is increasing at an alarming rate.<sup>1</sup> Managers must protect workers from violence by developing intervention efforts, including training in conflict resolution.

According to a survey of executives by the staffing firm Accountemps, managers spend about 15 percent of their time dealing with conflict, a number that has not changed much in the last 30 years.<sup>2</sup> Conflict may occur as a simple disagreement over the meaning of a work procedure, or it may be an argument over priorities and involve deciding which of two projects should draw from the limited funds available for project development. Or it might bring into focus a long-standing irritation that could result in a work stoppage.

Managers were asked to describe the type of conflicts in which they became involved. One manager described a situation in which four computer programmers wanted to go to a training seminar, but funds were available for only one. Another manager described how both she and a colleague wanted to take their vacations at the same time. Their manager said they could not do that and told them to work out the schedule between them. In both these situations, conflicts had to be resolved.

Organizational conflict is a natural part of the traditional organizational structure because a built-in opposition between units often exists. The causes of workplace conflict are complicated and situational, but factors correlated with conflict include

- unclear business goals, ambiguous roles, time pressure, and uncomfortable work environments;
- an organizational culture that permits bullying and discourages open communication;

- autocratic and laissez-faire leadership styles;
- office politics and performance-based reward systems that favor bullying behavior to get work done; and
- organizational change, including changes in management, staffing, and budget.<sup>3</sup>

In fact, organizational conflict is so pervasive that over seventy-five university-affiliated centers, institutes, associations, and consortiums are dedicated to research on this subject. One such organization, the Association for Conflict Resolution (ACR), has over six thousand members: mediators, arbitrators, facilitators, educators, and others involved in the field of conflict resolution and collaborative decision making. The ACR has chapters in thirteen U.S. states.

An increasing number of companies are also creating programs that help employees resolve their problems quickly and without external intervention. The policies are integrated into the corporate culture and use a variety of approaches, including hot lines, peer review panels, mediation, and arbitration, to resolve conflicts.

## BENEFITS OF CONFLICT

Conflict generally has a negative connotation; however, conflict is a positive occurrence if managed properly. Conflict requires managers to analyze their goals, creates dialogue among employees, and fosters creative solutions. Without conflict, employees and organizations would stagnate.

Generational conflict in the workplace is one example of how conflict can have positive effects. For the first time in U.S. history, five generations are working together. Possibilities for conflict run high because of differences in work style and philosophy. Tammy Erickson, author of *Plugged in: The Generation Y Guide to Thriving at Work*, compared generational preferences for communicating in team environments. She described Boomers and Generation X'ers as “planners and schedulers,” while Millennials are “coordinators” who prefer to get together only as needed, and who find the extent of scheduling that goes on in most workplaces to be inefficient. Team leaders working with colleagues from other generations need to avoid forming negative conclusions, to bring team members’ diverse communication preferences out in the open, and to help the team legitimize each person’s view. Teams can decide together which norms will work best for the team and for the work that must be accomplished.<sup>4</sup>

Conflict also may foster creativity. Research suggests that moderate conflict yields higher quality decisions than little or no conflict.<sup>5</sup> Task conflict helps to overcome individual psychological distortions and biases by forcing people out of their traditional modes of thinking. In this way, conflict promotes the unstructured thinking that some see as required for developing good, novel alternatives to difficult problems.<sup>6</sup> The conflict is particularly useful in the early stages of team work, when the group is establishing goals and tasks, and less useful near the end of the project.<sup>7</sup>

### STOP AND THINK

1. To what extent do age differences among employees at your workplace cause conflicts?
2. How can these differences be beneficial to productivity?

Thus, managers who pride themselves on running a smooth ship may not be as effective as they think. The smooth ship may reflect suppressed conflict that could have potential benefit if allowed free play. In fact, the conflict might not be as harmful as its suppression.

What causes conflict? When is it functional and when is it not? What methods can be used to resolve conflict? Is any one method best? The following discussion answers these questions, but first we review the relationship between communication and conflict.

## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COMMUNICATION AND CONFLICT

As is true with many other terms, *conflict* has both a colloquial meaning and a long list of specific definitions. However, a quick review of these definitions will help to describe the nature of conflict. Katz and Kahn state that two systems—which could include persons, groups, organizations, or nations—are in conflict when they interact directly in such a way that the actions of one tend to prevent or compel some outcome against the resistance of the other.<sup>8</sup> Another author states that conflict characterizes a situation in which the conditions, practices, or goals of individuals are inherently incompatible.<sup>9</sup> A third definition presents conflict as a struggle over values or claims to scarce resources, power, or status. In this struggle, opponents aim to neutralize, injure, or eliminate their rivals.<sup>10</sup>

These three definitions help define the nature of conflict and indicate the role of communication in conflict. The first definition uses the word *interact*, implying a communication interaction of some kind. The second definition uses the phrase *inherently incompatible*, and the third definition includes *a struggle over values*. Communication is the method by which managers determine if something is inherently incompatible, and the struggle over values is carried out through communication behaviors. Thus, the ability to communicate effectively may eliminate conflict immediately; however, ineffective communication may cause a situation to appear inherently incompatible; thus, a struggle over values may ensue. The conclusion is that communicative behavior may cause, as well as resolve conflict.

Let us examine the specific characteristics of conflict and the corresponding implications for communication. The following are four axioms that are particularly relevant to communication.<sup>11</sup> These axioms are reviewed to demonstrate how effective communication can make conflict a constructive, positive process.

1. *Conflict involves at least two parties.* Because conflict involves at least two parties, communication is an integral component. Conflict can be generated or resolved only through communication. Consequently, managers must understand the types of communication interactions that can cause conflict and the communication patterns that are most functional after conflict has developed. In fact, a good communicator can bring conflict to the surface and make it a productive process.
2. *Conflict develops from perceived mutually exclusive goals.* Mutually exclusive goals may exist as a result of objective facts or an individual's values and perceptions. However, the key factor is that the parties involved perceive the objectives as mutually exclusive. But only through communication can the parties in conflict

determine the existence of a superordinate goal that may meet both parties' goals. Again, the positive nature of conflict is evident because without conflict the parties may not know about the superordinate goal.

3. *Conflict involves parties who may have different values or perceptions.* To illustrate how conflictive parties may have different value systems, consider how a first-level supervisor who was once a member of a trade union would have values much different from those of a college-educated engineer. This value difference may result in a potential conflict when the two employees consider implementing a computerized production control system. The supervisor could perceive the computerized system as too difficult to learn and as a threat to employees' job security. However, the engineer might perceive it solely as an engineering challenge. In this case, values affect perception.

The selective attention principle says that we tend to perceive what is important and pleasing to us and avoid what is not. The following example shows how differences in perception led to a major conflict.<sup>12</sup> A textile mill allowed a conflict to develop that resulted in a big labor turnover. The mill had informed employees when they were hired that it gave automatic raises each year and merit raises for deserving employees after nine and eighteen months. The employees, however, understood this to mean they would receive an automatic raise at *all three* of these periods—nine, twelve, and eighteen months. When they did not obtain their raises, many of them quit because they thought the employer had not maintained the original promise to grant wage increases. In this case, the differences between employee and employer perception led to conflicting views.

When conflicting parties have different values or perceptions, communication is important in two ways. First, exposure and communication between two individuals will likely result in the individuals eventually sharing values and becoming friendlier toward each other.<sup>13</sup> Second, as more accurate communication develops between two managers, the perceptual differences will subside; hence, the probability of conflict will be reduced.

Chapter 1 indicated that cultural diversity is increasing in organizations. This diversity will create conflict, but it will be exciting and productive because diverse viewpoints, when managed appropriately, will result in more creative outcomes.

4. *Conflict terminates only when each side is satisfied that it has won or lost.* Win-lose situations seem to dominate our culture—for instance, law courts use the adversary system and political parties strive to win elections. Competition to win in sports is so keen that fights among spectators are not uncommon. The pervasive win-lose attitude in our culture has made it difficult to imagine that both parties may “win” in any situation labeled a conflict. This problem recalls the first axiom, which states that conflict develops from mutually exclusive goals. However, accurate communication may reveal that a win or a loss is not the only alternative.

## SOURCES OF CONFLICT

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When managers perceive conflict in the workplace, they may assume it is due to incompatible personalities. “Why can’t everyone just get along with each other?” they plead.

But managers need to understand that the sources of conflict are often deeper than individual personality. Then they will be better able to select the appropriate communication strategy. The underlying causes or sources of conflict situations often are built into the organization's hierarchy and ways of doing business.

The lines of authority in an organization can encourage conflict. For example, the lending and the savings departments are interdependent in all banks. The lending department cannot lend funds until the savings department has collected funds. By the same token, the savings department would be hard pressed if the lending department had no customers. These two areas have common goals within the bank (profit and continued operation of the bank), but their interdependence can lead to conflict over their respective authority. While the savings department would like to give high interest rates to please its customers, the lending department wants to provide low interest rates to please its customers. When the interdependence of these departments becomes a central issue, conflict will arise over whose authority takes precedence or whose responsibility for the bank's profit goal is more relevant.

The distribution of the limited resources available in an organization is another source of conflict. If resources were unlimited, few conflicts would arise, but this condition seldom exists. When resources are limited and more than one person or group wants a share, conflict develops. The most obvious conflict occurs during the annual budget review. With funds traditionally limited, it is necessary to decide which department will get what amount. Since each department manager's goal appears most important from her own perspective, the funds allocated to one department may appear to be funds taken from another. The interdependency of the various departments vying for budget allocations thus can become a major source of conflict.

Diverse goals are a third source of organizational conflict. For instance, clashes may occur between quality assurance managers and production managers in a manufacturing environment. The goal of the quality people is zero defects, while the goal of production is filling the customer's order on time. Conflicting goals and roles can also explain why a company's salespeople routinely ignore the accounting staff's requests for expense forms and receipts or why a shift foreman refuses to let his workers attend an employee development session offered by human resources. To alleviate such traditional conflicts between functional units, senior executives should remind their managers of the overarching goals, mission, and vision.

## Conflict and Perception

The relationship between conflict and perception has already been briefly discussed. Perceived conflict is present when the parties recognize the conditions or when the parties misunderstand one another's true position.

Clearly, failure to identify potentially conflictive situations may prevent conflicts from developing immediately. More often, though, the inaccurate or illogical perception of a situation causes unnecessary conflict. An example of inaccurate perception is

### STOP AND THINK

1. In your work experience, which departments were in conflict most often?
2. How could these conflicts be resolved?

the case of manager praise. A poll by Maritz Incentives found wide-ranging opinions on appreciation in the workplace: 55 percent of employees said their bosses never or rarely thank them for their efforts. On the other hand, only 6 percent of supervisors said they never praise their direct reports; 34 percent said they praise their direct reports daily, and 45 percent said they do so weekly or monthly.<sup>14</sup> It is easy to see how this discrepancy of perceptions can lead to conflict.

The grid in Figure 13–1 shows why inaccurate perceptions create conflict in the managerial process. Assume two managers are discussing an issue. Two possibilities exist for each manager: Each correctly perceives the existence of a potential conflict or incorrectly perceives it. This results in the four possibilities diagrammed. The grid shows that an accurate mutual perception could possibly exist in only one of four occurrences. Of course, this is not always the case, but numerous conflicts not warranted by the actual situation may develop.

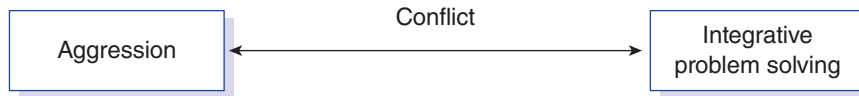
Further, two managers may be aware of serious disagreement over a policy, but it may not create any anxiety or affect their feelings toward one another. Competition for budget allocations, for example, do not need to be personalized.

Personally felt conflict may find expression in fear, threat, mistrust, and hostility. Consider the bank teller who called in a bomb threat on the day he was fired, so he could meet his former coworkers for drinks. No one knows the financial costs of such workplace revenge behaviors, but everyone agrees that a lack of communication causes most employee sabotage. “Getting back is the way of communicating when you can’t, or when you’re afraid to speak up for yourself,” explains William Lundin, a workplace relations specialist.<sup>15</sup> Employees often retaliate by decreasing their effort, time spent at work, and quality of work.<sup>16</sup> Other forms of sabotage by disgruntled employees include deleting data, copying data, and blocking user access to systems.<sup>17</sup> The worst case scenario is an incident of workplace violence. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, there were 417 workplace homicides in 2015.<sup>18</sup> And just as we prepare for natural disasters, we need to prepare for workplace violence.

What can managers do to prevent violence and acts of hostility? It is important to maintain a communication program that allows employees (a) to understand how their performance level is being evaluated, (b) to know the consequences of changing (and not changing)

**FIGURE 13–1 ■ Accuracy of Perceptions and Conflict**

		Manager 2	
		Accurate	Inaccurate
Manager 1	Accurate	Accurate mutual perception	Inaccurate mutual perception
	Inaccurate	Inaccurate mutual perception	Inaccurate mutual perception

**FIGURE 13-2 ■ Ways to Manifest Conflict**

their behavior, (c) to discuss their problems, (d) to explore options for solutions, and (e) to defuse anger. The venting of hostility can be therapeutic rather than detrimental, if managed properly. Group discussions can act as a safety valve for this hostility, as can periodic meetings between supervisors and direct reports. Effective managers do not become defensive even when they are the focus of the hostile communication. Nondefensive communication is the key to managing personally felt conflict.

The observable behavior of the manager, based on conditions, perceptions, and feelings, may be seen as either conflict or an attempt to establish mutual goals. The most obvious manifestations of conflict are open aggression or violence at one end of a continuum and integrative problem solving at the other end, as depicted in Figure 13-2. A continuum is used because generally neither totally open aggression nor completely satisfactory problem solving is manifest. However, the goal is to move as close as possible to integrative problem solving. As the remainder of this discussion shows, managers have numerous ways to manage conflict along this continuum as they attempt to resolve it.

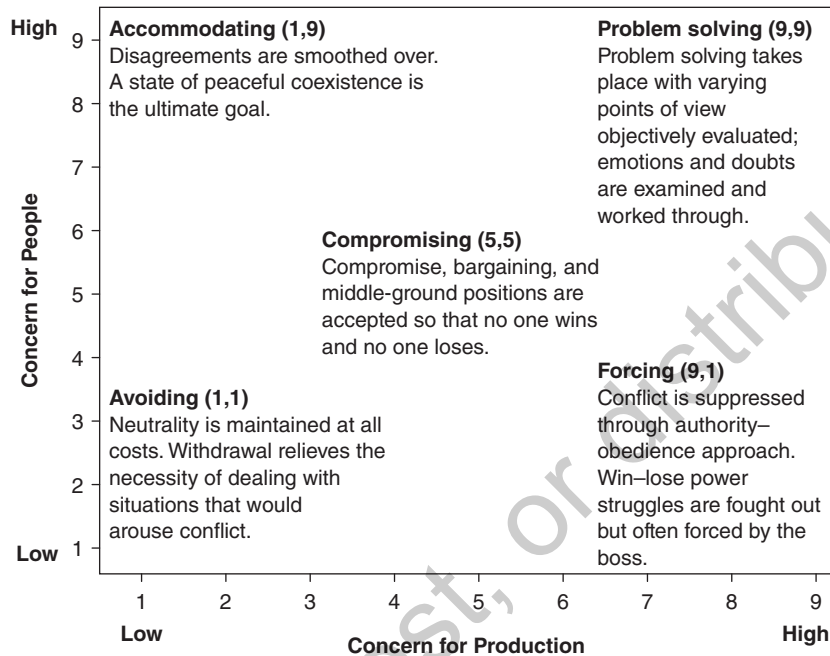
## STRATEGIES IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Now that we have looked at the relationship of conflict to managerial communication, discussed constructive conflict, and reviewed the sources of conflict, we can identify strategies for conflict resolution. Managerial communication strategies for managing conflict could be put into many categories. For our discussion, we use the system presented in Figure 13-3. This figure demonstrates that during a conflict, managers may emphasize interpersonal relations, task production, or a combination thereof. Five possible strategies are presented: avoiding, accommodating, forcing, compromising, and problem solving.<sup>19</sup>

While reviewing these strategies, the contingency approach to managerial communication should be kept in mind. Various conflict situations require different strategies, so effective communication requires that managers match the strategy to the situation.

### Avoiding

The avoidance or withdrawal strategy combines a low concern for production with a low concern for people. The person using this style sees conflict as a hopeless, useless experience. Rather than undergo the tension and frustration of conflict, managers using the avoidance or withdrawal style simply remove themselves from conflict situations. This avoidance may be physical or psychological. The person using this strategy will avoid

**FIGURE 13-3 ■ Strategies for Managing Conflict**

disagreement and tension, will not openly take sides in a disagreement among others, and will feel little commitment to any decisions reached. This conflict management style is associated with the laissez-faire leadership style.<sup>20</sup> Avoidance need not be dramatic. Many managers avoid by ignoring a comment or quickly changing the subject when conversation begins to threaten. Another way to avoid is to place the responsibility for an issue on a higher manager. A third way to withdraw is to use a simple response of “I’m looking into the matter,” with the hope that the other party will forget the issue.

This strategy is frequently used in large bureaucracies that have an overabundance of policies. Rather than attempt to resolve the conflict, managers simply blame it on *policy*. Managers who lack self-confidence in their communication abilities may hope the problem just disappears. However, this usually does not work. In fact, withdrawal from conflict has been negatively correlated with constructive conflict resolution. Withdrawal has been further negatively correlated with knowledge of the supervisor’s feelings and attitudes; open, upward communication; helpfulness of the supervisor; and adequacy of the planning relationship. Thus, managers who avoid conflict do not operate effectively in these critical managerial areas.<sup>21</sup>

### Accommodating

In accommodating, the second type of conflict resolution, managers try to deal with conflict by making everyone happy. When using this approach, the manager emphasizes



maintaining relationships with fellow employees and de-emphasizes achieving productive goals. Since the manager wants others' acceptance, he will give in to others' desires in areas that conflict with his own. Managers using this style often believe confrontation is destructive.

Typical attempts to accommodate may include such things as calling for a coffee break at a tense moment, breaking tension with humor, changing the topic, or engaging in some ritual show of togetherness such as an office birthday party. Since these efforts are likely to reduce felt conflict, they are more beneficial than simple avoidance. This reduction of felt conflict will probably have short-range effects and may even have some long-range benefit. However, just because someone does not experience a hostile or negative feeling does not mean the real cause of the conflict is resolved. In fact, accommodating is a camouflage approach that can break down at any time and create barriers to progress. Thus, research has found that it is used more in low- or medium-performance organizations than in high-performance organizations. In addition, accommodating style decreases as managers move up in an organization.<sup>22</sup>

## Forcing

Forcing, the third conflict management strategy, is used by the manager who attempts to meet production goals at all costs, without concern for the needs or acceptance of others. For such a manager, losing is destructive because it is viewed as reduced status, weakness, and the loss of self-image. Winning must be achieved at any cost and gives this manager a sense of excitement and achievement. Not surprisingly, forcing is commonly used by managers who use an autocratic leadership style or focus on performance goals.<sup>23</sup> A situation characterized by the forcing strategy will probably cause later conflicts. The language managers use to describe conflict situations in their organizations often reflects the negative effect this style may have: opposition, battle, fight, conquest, head-to-head, coercion, and smash. Such language and imagery can result in long-lasting, emotional wounds.<sup>24</sup> While force can resolve immediate disputes, the long-term effects will probably include a loss of productivity. Forcing in conflict situations negatively correlates with team development and may even trigger retaliation.<sup>25</sup> The major difficulty of a forcing strategy is that employees are reluctant to plan or carry out plans when they perceive that the ultimate resolution of the conflict will put them on the losing side of a win–lose position.

Interestingly, while little doubt exists that forcing has limited use, managers consider forcing to be their favorite backup strategy for dealing with conflict.<sup>26</sup> Immediate compliance is misperceived as a long-term solution in these cases.

## Compromising

Compromise, the fourth strategy for conflict resolution, assumes that half a loaf is better than none. This approach falls somewhere between forcing and accommodating. Since compromise provides some gain for both sides rather than a unilateral victory, many participants judge this approach as better than the other strategies just discussed.

Compromise is used when one of two conditions exists: (1) neither party involved believes he or she has the power to “force” the issue on the other party, or (2) one or

both of the parties believe winning may not be worth the cost in money, time, or energy. Compromise is often highly related to negotiating, which is the topic of the next chapter; however, several important points are pertinent here. First, compromise may lead to both parties' perceiving themselves as winners, but they may also both feel like losers. A negative overtone may develop in the working relationship between the employees involved, and any sense of trust may break down. While both parties involved probably entered the negotiations with a cooperative attitude, a sense of competition may be the result of compromise.

A second concern with compromise is that the party with the most information has the better position. This power of information may restrict open communication among employees. This situation in turn often results in a lopsided compromise. A third factor is the principle of the least interested party: The party that has the least interest in the outcome is in the more powerful position in the negotiations. As a result, an employee who has little concern about the welfare of the company may have an inordinate amount of influence in a compromise.

## PROBLEM SOLVING: THE WIN–WIN STRATEGY

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Thus far, it may seem that no totally acceptable, productive strategy exists to manage conflict. Everything has been discussed in terms of loss. Fortunately, this is not the case. Problem solving, the fifth strategy to be discussed, is a win–win strategy for conflict. This complex and highly effective style requires skillful, strategic managerial communication, but it reaps a big dividend; thus, the remainder of our discussion centers on this strategy. Let us first describe the win–win strategy and then examine specific techniques for implementation.

### Description of the Strategy

The key to this strategy is that it follows a mutual problem-solving approach rather than a combative one. In contrast to managers who use a forcing or compromising strategy, managers engaged in problem solving assume a high-quality, mutually acceptable solution is possible. The parties direct their energies toward defeating the problem and not each other.

The following example presents a clear description of the problem-solving approach to conflict resolution. It details a meeting in Wisconsin that set out to explore possible prison reforms.<sup>27</sup>

Nine of the state's top prison officials met to design an ideal correctional institution. In the course of the discussion, one group member proposed that uniforms traditionally worn by prison guards be eliminated. The group then began a lengthy argument about whether or not uniforms should be worn. One group member suggested that the issue be resolved democratically by vote. As a result, six people voted against uniforms and three voted in favor of them. The winning members looked pleased, while the losing members either got angry or withdrew from further discussion.

A group consultant present at the time suggested that the members take another look at the situation. Then he asked those in favor of uniforms what they hoped to accomplish (establishing goals). Those officials stated that part of the rehabilitative process in correctional institutions is that of teaching people to deal constructively with authority, and they saw uniforms as a means for achieving the goal. When asked why they opposed uniforms (analyzing the problem), the other group members said that uniforms created such a stigma that guards had an additional difficulty laying to rest the stereotypes held by inmates before they could deal with them on a one-to-one basis. The group consultant then asked the group what ways might be appropriate to meet the combined goals, namely, teaching people to deal with authority and avoiding the difficulty of stereotypes held about traditional uniforms (generating solutions). While working on the problem, the group identified ten possible solutions, including prison personnel using name tags, color-coded casual dress, or uniforms for guard supervisors but not for guards in constant contact with prisoners. After discussing the various alternatives, the group decided upon the third solution (selecting the best solution).

In its first discussion, the group engaged in clear conflict that was only partially resolved by vote. In the discussion led by the consultant, the group turned to problem solving, eventually reaching consensus and a win–win solution.

## Beliefs Necessary to Implement the Strategy

We are suggesting that the problem-solving strategy is the most desirable; however, a manager wanting to effectively use this approach must hold a series of beliefs.

### Belief 1: Cooperation Is Better Than Competition

The manager must first believe cooperation is better than competition. U.S. management seems to be based on competition, so it is difficult to envision cooperation as a viable possibility at times.<sup>28</sup> This competition may develop out of Darwin's concept of survival of the fittest: A manager who has a self-image of weakness may fear extinction. Lacking confidence, this person feels a sense of competitiveness with others in the company.

Competition also has an important role in stimulating employees to achieve more. However, as technology becomes more complex and employees more specialized, interdependence is required. Few tasks can be completed without the cooperation of many employees. The group as a whole becomes greater than the sum of all the individuals, so cooperation is required. This is not to say that differences of opinion should be prevented.

Different opinions can lead to new insights and creativity as long as the opinions do not disrupt the group process. A manager must enter the conflict situation believing others' opinions are beneficial. He must be willing to listen. The emphasis on teamwork in today's work environment makes cooperation mandatory.

## STOP AND THINK

1. In today's team-based work environment, why do employees continue to be evaluated on the basis of their individual achievements?
2. What would be the effect of rewarding employees on the basis of their team's achievements?

### Belief 2: Parties Can Be Trusted

The second belief is that the other parties involved in the conflict can be trusted. Managers who are trusting will not conceal or distort relevant information, nor will they fear stating facts, ideas, conclusions, and feelings that would make them vulnerable.

In a study of group problem solving, half the groups were directed to trust other people, to express their views openly, to share information freely, and to aim at a high level of mutual confidence. The other groups were directed to behave in opposite ways. The researchers found that problem-solving groups with high trust will

- exchange relevant ideas and feelings more openly,
- develop greater clarification of goals and problems,
- search more extensively for alternative courses of action,
- have greater influence on solutions,
- be more satisfied with their problem-solving efforts,
- have greater motivation to implement conclusions,
- see themselves as closer and more of a team,
- have less desire to leave their group to join another.<sup>29</sup>

Trusting behavior causes reciprocity. Trusting cues will likely evoke trusting behavior from others. Conversely, when a manager does not trust others, the cues to mistrust will evoke mistrustful behavior on the other's part. So it is best to assume a person can be trusted and to change that view only with evidence to the contrary.

### Belief 3: Status Differences Can Be Minimized

The third belief that managers must possess is that status differences between parties can be minimized in a conflict situation. Differences in power or status that separate two individuals into we–they orientation inhibit conflict resolution. A manager who is in a higher power position may yield to the temptation to use the power inherent in the position as the rationale for forcing the solution. If that happens, the participants, rather than confronting the problem and treating each other as equals, will regress into a win–lose style, and the result is much less productive. Managers who do not rely on status will spend time listening to everyone involved. The section in Chapter 10 on developing a listening climate provides ideas for managers who want to minimize their perceived power and encourage communication both upward and laterally.

### Belief 4: Mutually Acceptable Solutions Can Be Found

The final belief managers must hold is that a mutually acceptable and desirable solution exists and can be found. Unless both parties believe this is possible, a win–lose strategy will result. Conflict resolution can be extremely frustrating and time consuming unless both parties remain optimistic about finding a mutually acceptable answer. This is not

to say that both parties are meeting the same goal. Rather, both parties can reach their different goals in an acceptable manner.

Each of these four beliefs—cooperation, trust, equal status, and mutually acceptable goals—is important. A manager must believe in these concepts to implement an effective win–win conflict resolution strategy. But belief in these concepts is not enough; managers must also use the appropriate communication skills in a strategic manner. The next part of this discussion describes these skills and the appropriate method for implementing them.

## Implementing the Strategy

Specific steps should be followed to achieve the problem-solving strategy. However, before these steps are reviewed, key communication principles must be applied:

1. Use neutral rather than emotional terms. “I still tend to prefer my approach” is better than “Your idea is not functional.”
2. Avoid absolute statements that leave no room for modification. “I think this is the way . . .” is better than “This is the *only* way.”
3. Ask open-ended questions.
4. Avoid leading questions. This rule is especially important where status differences are present.
5. Repeat key phrases to make sure all parties are communicating on the same wavelength.
6. Use terms that all parties clearly understand.
7. Allow the other person to complete statements. Do not interrupt.
8. Use effective listening skills, especially paraphrasing, to ensure the other person’s ideas are fully understood.
9. Be aware of the importance of physical arrangements. For instance, sitting in front of a big desk may cause a person to feel defensive.

When managers use the communication principles just presented as they follow the sequence given next, they should be able to resolve conflicts successfully.

The first step in implementing the problem-solving strategy is to maximize environmental conditions, as summarized in Table 13–1 and discussed below:

- *Review and adjust conflict conditions.* Earlier, we identified sources of conflict inherent in the organization, including goals and resources. When a manager can identify these conditions, it is sometimes possible to adjust them to promote cooperation.
- *Review and adjust perceptions.* Managers should adjust and correct their perceptions through reality testing. “Am I viewing the situation or the behavior

**TABLE 13-1 ■ Maximizing Environmental Conditions**

Review and adjust conflict conditions.
Review and adjust perceptions.
Review and adjust attitudes.

as it actually exists?” Perceptions become more accurate as an individual learns more facts about the condition and has resulting impressions confirmed by others’ perceptions.

- *Review and adjust attitudes.* Since an optimal outcome depends on trust, mutuality, and cooperation, little success will result if the parties are distrustful, hostile, and competitive. Accordingly, one should identify the attitudes and feelings of the parties engaged in the conflict as far as possible. Often, the best strategy is to start with the easily solved problems. Once the easier problems are solved, a more positive attitude develops for the more complex conflict situation. The trust that results may make cooperative communication easier.

Once environmental conditions and perceptions have been identified and perhaps adjusted, you are ready to begin the actual problem-solving strategy. John Dewey, a U.S. educator who lived and wrote in the early part of the 20th century, first articulated this process in one of his books, *How We Think*. Over one hundred years later, this rational problem-solving process is still frequently and successfully used in contemporary businesses. The reason for the popularity of this process is that it really does conform to human thought; it is “how we think.” In Chapter 4, you learned Dewey’s problem-solving process and how to apply it in meetings and team projects. Let us now review the five steps in the problem-solving process (summarized in Table 13-2) and see how it applies to conflict resolution.

1. *Define the problem.* A statement of the problem in a conflict situation is usually much more difficult than it seems. People tend to discuss solutions before they clearly define the problem. Because of this, our inclination is to state the problem as a solution rather than as a goal. This results in ambiguous communication, and it is common for the parties to focus on the solutions without having a clear definition of the problem. The outcome may be increased conflict. Second, managers must state the goals in the form of group goals rather than individual priorities. Third, the problem definition must be specific. One helpful strategy is to clearly write out the problem statement so everyone can see it and agree on it. Alternatively, the group can agree on a problem stated in a question format.
2. *Analyze the problem.* Again, managers tend to want to skip this step. After all, they may argue, they live with the problem. What is the point of spending more time wallowing in it? Dewey’s answer is that by exploring the depths of the problem, by looking at its history, causes, effects, and extent, one can later come up with a solution that addresses more than symptoms and that is more

**TABLE 13-2 ■ Dewey's Problem-Solving Process**

1. Define the problem.
2. Analyze the problem.
3. Brainstorm alternatives.
4. Develop criteria for a good solution.
5. Evaluate the brainstormed alternatives using the independently developed criteria for a good solution.

than a bandage. It will address the root cause of the problem, thus improving its chances of being successful.

3. *Brainstorm alternatives.* All parties should offer potential solutions. One idea may stimulate other ideas. The more employees communicate in an open, trusting environment, the greater the potential for generating effective solutions. Trust, of course, evaporates when an idea is criticized during a brainstorming session. As soon as someone says, "That's a terrible idea. It'll never work," who would be willing to take the risk of offering another idea? Managers must ensure that premature judging of solutions is avoided during this step.
4. *Develop criteria for a good solution.* These criteria or standards may already be in place and available. Other times, the organization's executives will specify to the problem-solving managers what a good solution must look like. Occasionally, the managers are expected to develop their own criteria. Common criteria for an optimal solution include the following: It must be cost-effective, it must be easily or quickly implemented, it must use only resources that are currently available, it must be legal, and it must be consistent with the organization's mission or values.
5. *Evaluate the brainstormed alternatives using the independently developed criteria for a good solution.* This is really the easiest step. By this time, attention to the problem is unified, and an open communication environment has been achieved with active participation by all the parties involved. The best solution appears automatically as the brainstormed alternative that matches your list of criteria.

## CONFLICT AND MANAGEMENT SUCCESS

The basic nature of organizational dynamics creates conflict.<sup>30</sup> As discussed earlier in this chapter, lines of authority, especially the supervisor-direct report relationship, often engender conflict. A typical example is when the supervisor provides corrective feedback and the direct report interprets it as aggressive, threatening, disrespectful, or offensive. Such negative emotions can escalate conflict and even prompt retaliation.<sup>31</sup> As a consequence, the professional relationship suffers, and employee morale and productivity

decline. To minimize the damage triggered by poorly communicated feedback, managers must understand and learn to manage conflict (See Table 13–3).

This chapter proposes that communication is at the foundation of conflict management. Since conflict is a pervasive, vital, but often troublesome aspect of organizational life, effective conflict management has become a major focus for business and industry training programs.<sup>32</sup> Recent studies indicate that employee training that develops social and emotional competency (popularly known as emotional intelligence or EI) is a better predictor of professional success than cognitive intelligence or specialized knowledge.<sup>33</sup> Daniel Goleman’s landmark book about EI listed six noncognitive competencies that help people cope with workplace pressures and the resulting conflict.

**TABLE 13–3 ■ When to Choose Each Conflict Resolution Approach**

Conflict Resolution Approach	Context of Conflict
Avoiding works best when	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There’s little chance you’ll get your way</li> <li>• The potential damage of addressing the conflict outweighs the benefits of resolution</li> <li>• People need a chance to cool down</li> <li>• Others are in a better position to resolve the conflict</li> <li>• The problem will go away by itself</li> </ul>
Accommodating works best when	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preserving harmony is important</li> <li>• Personal antagonism is the major source of conflict</li> <li>• The issue itself is unsolvable</li> <li>• You care more about the other person than getting your way</li> </ul>
Forcing works best when	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quick, decisive action is needed</li> <li>• A rule has to be enforced</li> <li>• You know you’re right</li> <li>• You must protect yourself</li> </ul>
Compromising works best when	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Two opponents are equal in power</li> <li>• Temporary settlements on complex issues are needed</li> <li>• Opponents do not share goals</li> <li>• Forcing or problem solving won’t work</li> </ul>
Problem solving works best when	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Both sets of concerns are too important to be compromised</li> <li>• It is important to work through hard feelings</li> <li>• Commitment to the resolution is important</li> <li>• A permanent solution is desired</li> </ul>



These competencies are generally accepted as the starting point for employee training in emotion management:

- Become self-aware in managing emotions and controlling impulses
- Set goals and perform well
- Be motivated and creative
- Empathize with others
- Handle relationships effectively
- Develop appropriate social skills<sup>34</sup>

Mastery of these competencies greatly affects the way employees interact with their coworkers, direct reports, and managers. Clearly, whether one is a college student anticipating a career in management or a practicing manager with years of experience, it is necessary to continually hone constructive communication strategies for conflict management.

## SUMMARY

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Managers are likely to spend at least 15 percent of their time dealing with some kind of conflict, so it is important to understand the causes of conflict and productive methods for resolution. Because miscommunication is an integral element behind conflict, effective managerial communication is one key to resolution.

Conflict can be constructive as well as destructive. The nature of the word *conflict* implies opposing positions with negative results; however, when properly managed, conflict may be a positive force. An important managerial role is to be able to identify the difference between destructive and constructive conflict.

Managers can use one of five strategies to resolve conflict: avoiding, accommodating, forcing, compromising, or problem solving. The first four strategies are termed win–lose or lose–lose because one or both parties in the conflict will lose. However, the fifth strategy is termed a win–win approach because both parties in the conflict are potential winners; consequently, the effective manager should strive for the win–win style.

The problem-solving strategy can be achieved when the manager believes in cooperation, trusts the other party, minimizes status differences, and believes a mutually acceptable and desirable solution is available. These beliefs are a prerequisite to success, but satisfactory results cannot be obtained unless sound communication principles are used to put the beliefs into action. A sequence of steps should be followed when implementing the win–win strategy: review and adjust conflict conditions, perceptions, and attitudes; develop a problem definition; analyze the problem; brainstorm alternatives; evaluate alternatives according to criteria; and develop the best solution.

When a manager uses strategic communication skills, believes in the win–win approach to conflict resolution, and follows the correct sequence of activities, a constructive approach to conflict resolution can result.

## CASES FOR SMALL-GROUP DISCUSSION

### CASE 13-1

#### *Conflict and Technology*

Janna White sat in her office, perplexed. Two days previously, she had been given responsibility to lead a team on a project that would have a significant impact on the investment decision under consideration at PlexiWarm Corporation. The decision involved an expansion of the firm's product lines to include high-density spray foam insulation (the firm currently produces rigid foam insulation panels). Janna had scheduled the first team meeting for this afternoon and was looking forward to working on such a significant project. She had just opened her e-mail to find a stream of confusing communications from two team members. Apparently, the two had been exchanging e-mail and text messages in such rapid succession that the replies had become very disjointed. The final messages had come about an hour earlier; both parties had basically concluded that they simply could not work together because of the poor communication of the other person!

Janna had the record only of the e-mail messages—the text messages had been sent between each person's individual cell phones. Without a complete record of the communication, Janna did not have a clue about how to try to resolve the conflict. She e-mailed each person, asking whether they had kept a record of the "text thread." She quickly got responses that neither had kept the stream of messages and that each now refused to work with the other.

#### *Questions*

1. What could Janna have done in advance to try to prevent the conflict?
2. Now that the conflict has occurred, and since this significant project still must be carried out, how should Janna manage the conflict?
3. Looking ahead, what is the likely effect of the conflict on team productivity?

### CASE 13-2

#### *Conflict Over Job Duties*

Linda Sims is the manager of the accounting department and Jose Martinez is the manager of the sales department for a production company. This is a fast-growing firm, and the staff of the accounting department (eleven employees) is often overwhelmed with work.

Since the accounting department is located immediately next to the credit department, Ruth Rankin, the administrative assistant in credit, sometimes works on journal entries assigned to her by Sims.

The company has experienced especially rapid growth over the past six months, which has caused everyone to be busier than usual. With the increase in sales volume, the credit office is under pressure to process applications more quickly, and Rankin is available to help Sims out with accounting overflow less often.

Sims complains to Martinez that she needs Rankin to work in accounting more than he needs her in credit. Martinez's response is, "If I can't move the credit applications through the pipeline in a timely manner, soon there'll be no need for an accounting department, because this company will be out of business."

#### *Questions*

1. What is the cause of this conflict?
2. Write a problem statement for this situation.

3. If you were Sims, how would you approach Martinez in this situation?
4. What style did Sims initially use?
5. What could Sims do to gain Martinez's cooperation rather than make him defensive?

### CASE 13-3

#### *Conflict Among Team Members*

Rod Edwards, the advertising manager for Waterlite Advertising and Associates, has two assistants. One is Gina Reese, an account executive who gets clients for the company. Edwards's second assistant is Mina Patel, a copywriter. She does the actual writing and designing of the ads for the clients.

Reese and Patel usually have a close working relationship because they work as a team on all clients' accounts. Reese gets the clients and discusses their needs with them. Afterward, she tells Patel about the conversation and the clients' needs, so Patel can design the right ad. Once Patel finishes the ad, Reese presents it to the client. If the ad is a success, it is usually Reese who gets the praise and recognition because she is the one who interfaces with the client.

In the past, Patel was not bothered by the recognition Reese got because she always knew she was the one who designed the ad. But the last ad Patel designed brought in a \$1 million contract to the firm. Edwards immediately gave Reese a raise for bringing in the client but did not give Patel any recognition.

Naturally, this caused friction between Reese and Patel, and their relationship began to deteriorate. Four days after Reese got the raise, their conflict reached a climax. Reese borrowed Patel's stapler (a trivial occurrence) and forgot to return it. Patel caused a scene and refused to talk to Reese for the next few days.

The problem was brought to Edwards's attention because his department's productivity was declining. For the ads to be developed, the assistants had to work as a team.

Edwards called both employees into his office and immediately started lecturing them. He insisted they get along and begin working on the next ad. He told them he expected an ad finished by noon the following day. Reese and Patel walked out of Edwards's office without resolving the problem. They did get some work done the next day, but their close relationship was never resumed.

#### *Questions*

1. What kind of conflict resolution strategy did Edwards use? What kind should he have used?
2. This is an example of destructive conflict. Could it develop as a constructive situation?
3. What steps should Edwards have followed to develop a win-win strategy?

## EXERCISE

### CONFLICT RESOLUTION SURVEY

For each of the thirty statements listed below, indicate how frequently you typically behave as described when you come into conflict with another person. (Rather than responding to these statements generally, you may wish to relate the statements to a particular person or setting familiar to you.) Use the following scale.

2–Most of the time

1–Some of the time

0–Rarely

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. I ask for help in resolving the conflict from someone outside our relationship.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. I try to stress those things on which we both agree rather than focus on our disagreement.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. I suggest we search for a compromise solution acceptable to both of us.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. I attempt to bring out all the concerns of the other person.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. I am firm in pursuing my goals.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. I strive to preserve our relationship.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. I seek to split the difference in our positions where possible.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. I work toward a solution that meets *both* our needs.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. I avoid the discussion of emotionally charged issues.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. I try to impose my solution on the other person.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11. I emphasize whatever similarity I see in our positions.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 12. I try to postpone any discussion until I have had time to think it over.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 13. I propose a middle ground to the other person.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 14. I use whatever power I have to get my wishes.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 15. I attempt to get all our points immediately out in the open.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 16. I give up one point in order to gain another.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 17. I encourage the other person to offer a full explanation of her or his ideas to me.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 18. I try to get the other person to see things my way.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 19. I treat the other person as considerately as possible.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 20. I suggest we think our concerns over individually before we meet in the hope that the anger will cool down.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 21. I press to get my points made.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 22. I support a direct and frank discussion of the problem.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 23. I try to find a fair combination of gains and losses for both of us.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 24. I try not to allow the other person's feelings to become hurt.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 25. I avoid taking positions that would create controversy.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 26. I suggest we each give in on some of our needs to find a solution we can both live with.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 27. I listen carefully in order to understand the other person as well as possible.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 28. I soothe the other person's feelings if emotions are running high.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 29. I assert my position strongly.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 30. I shrink from expressions of hostility.

## SCORING THE CONFLICT RESOLUTION SURVEY

Fill in the blanks below with the same scale scores you entered on the survey. Then total your scores for each conflict resolution approach. Note that the blanks to be filled in do not always appear in the same order as the items on the survey.

Scale Score	Item No.	Scale Score	Item No.	Scale Score	Item No.	Scale Score	Item No.	Scale Score	Item No.
	1		2		5		3		4
	9		6		10		7		8
	12		11		14		13		15
	20		19		18		16		17
	25		24		21		23		22
	30		28		29		26		27
Avoiding		Accommodating		Forcing		Compromising		Problem Solving	

This is your conflict resolution profile. Note that your score for each approach can range from a low of 0 to a high of 12. The approach with the highest score is your preferred approach to conflict. The second highest is the one you tend to use under pressure.

### Student Study Site

Visit the Student Study Site at [study.sagepub.com/hynes7e](http://study.sagepub.com/hynes7e) for web quizzes, video and multimedia resources, and case studies.

### Notes

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