

Fundamentals of Organizational Communication

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Organizational Conflict

This chapter is designed to contribute to knowledge by defining the concept of conflict, describing its various contexts, causes, and consequences, and developing an analysis framework for understanding its process. Knowledge competencies will in turn help develop analysis skills for specific situations. We develop sensitivity competencies by identifying individual and group predispositions and style preferences for conflict, by understanding how framing and sensemaking influence conflict, by becoming familiar with strategies and tactics commonly used in conflicts, and by describing emotion during conflict. Sensitivity competencies influence the use of verbal and problem-solving process skills appropriate for each individual and the conflict at hand. We develop value competencies by exploring productive consequences of conflict, identifying supportive climates for conflict, and clarifying ethical conflict behaviors. As would be expected, value competencies are reflected in the use of ethical and supportive skills during conflict.

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Defining and Describing Conflict Processes

- Conflict can be described as a process that occurs when individuals, small groups, or organizations perceive or experience frustration in attaining goals and addressing concerns.
- At times this frustration is the result of a struggle over different values or scarce rewards, whereas other times the central issue is the status or power of involved individuals. Regardless of the reasons, for all conflict participants the process includes perceptions, emotions, behaviors, and outcomes.

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Conflict Context

- Conflict can occur in any organizational setting in which there are two or more competing responses to a single event. In other words, conflict can occur in any context: intrapersonal, interpersonal, small-group, intergroup, or organization-wide or between the organization and its broader environment.
- Intrapersonal conflict, for example, is not readily observable through overt behaviors; an individual experiencing internal conflict may not discuss the problem may be observed to be under pressure or generally in a bad mood.

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Conflict Causes

- Causes include change, scarce resources, technology, dissent, difficult people, irrationality, incivility, diverse backgrounds and cultures, deception, identities, stigmas, emotional labor, burnout, relationships of all types, preferences, and past experiences.

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Conflict Episode

- Knowing what conflict is, why it happens, and in what context it occurs contributes to our understanding of conflict as a complex interaction of both individual and group perceptions, emotions, behaviors, and outcomes. Researchers describe these complex interactions as conflict episodes.
- **Scholar Louis Pondy (1967) provided a particularly useful understanding of episodes as five basic conflict stages: (1) latent conflict, (2) perceived conflict, (3) felt conflict, (4) manifest conflict, and (5) conflict aftermath.** These stages are seen as influencing one another, and the total interaction determines whether the conflict is productive or counterproductive. The stages help us visualize conflict as a process and analyze specific conflicts from a process perspective.

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Latent Conflict

- Latent conflict refers to underlying conditions in organizations and individual relationships that have the potential for conflict. For example, decisions about responsibility and authority, control of resources, goals, and activities in the pursuit of goals all are necessary for organizational functioning, yet few, if any, organizations make these decisions with the total agreement of all members. In other words, the daily functioning of the organization generates disagreement and conflict.

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Perceived Conflict

- Most organizations, however, have disagreements about even routine decisions. Who gets a promotion, which approach is best to achieve a sales goal, and how individual performance is to be evaluated are examples of decisions frequently subject to different viewpoints and misunderstandings. When individuals or groups become aware these differences exist, they are in the perceived conflict stage of an episode..

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Felt Conflict

- Closely linked to the perceived conflict stage is felt conflict, the emotional impact the perception of conflict has on potential conflict participants. This stage usually precedes actual conflict behaviors and is important to behavior because it represents the merger of our perceptions and emotional reactions. It is at the felt conflict stage when we conceptualize or define probable outcomes should an actual conflict occur; in other words, it is our ego-investment stage.
- The felt conflict stage is an expansion of the perceived conflict stage. Perceptions are intensified by our emotional reactions to the potential conflict.

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Manifest Conflict

- The manifest conflict stage has been referred to as the “action time” of conflict or the time “when the lid blows off and we really get down to business.”
- Actual conflict behaviors: problem solving, open aggression, covert action, and numerous other possibilities; influential for determining the productivity of the conflict and the way conflict participants will interact in the future.
- In this stage, communication behavior is influenced by participants’ conflict preferences, perceptions of rules of interaction, power relationships, roles, and skills and abilities. All too often it is this manifest stage that we recognize as conflict, without realizing the powerful influence of previous stages.

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Conflict Aftermath

- The conflict aftermath (outcomes) stage is a result of the complex interactions of latent conditions, perceived conflict, felt conflict, and manifest conflict. Put simply, this stage is what happens—in terms of both issues and relationships— as a result of the other four stages. It is the stage in which we evaluate the conflict as productive or counterproductive

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Conflict Consequences

- It is important to understand the importance of productive conflict for both individuals and groups. Conflict can stimulate creativity, solve problems, improve interpersonal relationships, and improve trust. While most acknowledge these benefits, many of us also have experienced destructive conflict where trust is lost, relationships are damaged, and generally negative outcomes prevail. Negative conflict experiences contribute to aggression, burnout, lowered commitment, silence, withdrawal, and a host of other problem behaviors. Conflict is related to the building of positive reputations or negative ones. Conflict can damage an organization or improve its overall effectiveness. These varied consequences require all of us to think about our communication competences as we engage in this normal but often uncomfortable process.

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The Individual in Organizational Conflict

- Organizations bring together diverse individuals, some of whom approach conflict as you would and others with very different preferences. The various predispositions, skills, and abilities of individuals in organizations influence how organizational conflict occurs. Sensitivity to these differences is central to becoming a competent communicator within a complex environment

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Orientation/ Predisposition/Styles

- Prominent conflict researchers such as Leonard Berkowitz (1962), Robert Blake and Jane Mouton (1964), Jay Hall (1969), and Kenneth Thomas (1976, 1988) all support the notion individuals have behavioral orientations/ predispositions or styles for handling conflict.
- Researchers further conclude individuals have an order of preference among the styles that ultimately influence communication choices.
- In other words, an individual has a dominant or most preferred style, but when that style seems inappropriate in a given situation or does not work, the individual may go to his or her next preference.

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Avoidance

- Avoidance Individuals preferring the avoidance style are unlikely to pursue their own goals and needs or to support relationships and the goals and needs of others during conflict. Conflict makes them very uncomfortable and often fearful. Although avoiders may have a genuine concern for goals and relationships, they do not see conflict as a positive solution. Avoiders may cope well during times of harmony but refrain—often both psychologically and physically—from participating in conflict situations.

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Competition

- The individual who prefers competition approaches conflict by emphasizing personal goals and needs without considering the opinions or needs of others in the conflict. Competitive individuals often conceptualize conflict as win/lose and prefer to view themselves as winners. This orientation can block good problem solving, particularly if the competitive person needs input on a decision. On a more positive note, when a group is hopelessly deadlocked, competitors often believe it is their responsibility to make a decision and to take responsibility for that decision. Given ability appropriate to the problem, this approach can be organizationally effective

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Compromise

- Compromisers prefer to balance people concerns with task issues and often approach conflict with a give-and-take attitude that contributes to negotiation. Compromisers engage in give-and-take toward a goal or desired outcome in order to resolve the conflict situation. Most of us can identify numerous times when conflict was managed through compromise. Compromise works because all parties can minimize losses while establishing some gains. Indeed, organizations frequently encourage compromise, and it has become a preferred orientation in many decision-making groups

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Accommodation

- People who want to be liked, have high affiliative needs, or genuinely are concerned for the needs of others often prefer an accommodative approach to conflict. Accommodation is characterized by the sacrifice of personal goals to maintain relationships or in some cases to maintain peace or avoid conflict whether or not the relationship is maintained over the long term. This style can provide important support to groups engaged in making difficult decisions, but it also encourages the accommodative individual to abandon issue, goal, or task input when others appear to disagree.

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Collaboration

- The collaborative style is clearly seen as the ideal because this approach influences individuals to work for goals, to examine issues thoughtfully, and to be task-oriented while supporting others to do the same. On the other hand, collaboration is the most difficult of all the styles to actually use for strategic objectives and tactical behaviors. Individuals who prefer collaboration can behave collaboratively only when others assume a collaborative orientation and have enough task or goal information to solve the problem thoroughly.

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Strategic Objective

- As Thomas (1976) suggested, individuals' strategic objectives in conflict are determined not only by orientations or preferences for conflict styles but also by assessments of the probable outcomes of behavior within particular contexts. Specifically, strategic objectives are determined by matching general preferences for particular conflict styles with assessments of the risks involved in a particular situation. We assess the strategies we will utilize based on our preferences and an assessment of the probable behaviors of others. Organizational role, power positions, previous experiences, and the importance of specific issues all contribute to the strategic objectives adopted by conflict participants.
- A strategic choice is associated with attempting to escalate, reduce, maintain, or avoid a conflict. Strategic choices are based on what we want to happen in a particular situation. The behaviors we use—tactics—are related to our attempts to move the conflict in a desired direction. Tactics and strategies change within the conflict based on reactions from and relationships to others.

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Communication Tactics in Conflict

- Conflict tactics can be described as communication behaviors that attempt to move the conflict toward escalation, reduction, maintenance at the present level, or avoidance. The tactics adopted are influenced by individual conflict preferences and strategies and by overall organizational values about how conflict is supposed to work.
- For example, powerful individuals frequently use competitive and confrontational tactics, whereas individuals apprehensive about communicating use more avoidance tactics. Some organizations encourage open debate and disagreement, whereas others insist on disagreement without personal attacks or displays of anger. Still others discourage overt conflict of any type.



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Emotion During Conflict

- Tricia Jones (1997) described emotion as having three components: cognitive, physiological, and behavioral. The cognitive component of emotion involves the appraisal of situations that in turn evoke emotional responses. The physiological component involves the embodied experiences that literally radiate throughout the body as ongoing lived experiences. Finally, the expressive component of emotion is what we do—the behavioral response—as an expression of the cognitive and physiological experience.

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Groups in Organizational Conflict

- Most of us have been in groups in which tensions and conflict made us uncomfortable or blocked problem solving. It is hoped that most of us also have belonged to groups in which conflict contributed to new and better ways of doing things, actually strengthening the group's ability to work together. Think for a moment about these experiences. What made the difference? How did you feel and behave in these different circumstances?

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Group Members in Conflict

- Tim Kuhn and Marshall Scott Poole (2000) provided an expansion of the individual approach when they considered conflict styles at the group level “as a typical interaction pattern a group enacts when members deal with oppositions and disagreements.”
- According to Kuhn and Poole, these group styles are “embodied in group norms about how to handle disagreements.” Kuhn and Poole use the categories of avoidance, distributive, and integrative styles to assess the effect of conflict styles on group decision-making effectiveness. Avoidance styles describe behavior that minimizes addressing the conflict.
- A distributive style, much like the competitive style, uses a confrontational approach, with one party or group essentially giving in to another. The integrative approach is characterized by cooperative and collaborative behaviors to pursue mutually positive resolutions. After studying several teams over a period of time, Kuhn and Poole concluded groups that developed integrative conflict management styles made more effective decisions than groups that used confrontation and avoidance. Groups that did not develop a stable conflict style were also less effective than groups with integrative styles.

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Framing and Sensemaking

- How groups conceptualize or frame conflicts and how groups make sense of conflicts influence all types of organizational conflicts and the processes utilized to deal with conflicts.
- Boris Brummans, Linda Putnam, Barbara Gray, Ralph Hanke, Roy Lewicki, and Carolyn Wiethoff (2008) described framing from a sensemaking perspective. Their research suggested members of groups in a dispute may or may not “rely on a similar repertoire for making sense of what is going on.” In other words, people who share the same or similar experiences will focus on difference aspects of the experiences to make sense of what is happening.

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Procedural Conflict

- Many types of organizational groups conflict over procedures or ways of doing things. How the group is organized, the process of decision making, who accepts responsibility, or what happens when responsibilities are not carried out all can contribute to tension and conflict within groups. Most of you have experienced this procedural conflict when preparing a project for a class. Some group members preferred majority rule, others worked for genuine consensus, and still others attempted to force their positions or opinions on the entire group.

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Interpersonal Issues

- One of the most common types of group conflict emerges when all members do not fairly or equally perform their responsibilities or make contributions to the group. The necessity to “carry” a member of the team raises tension and disrupts group cohesiveness. Groups also have interpersonal power clashes among members who seek influence and control. Powerful members produce conflict when attempting to force group members to take sides in essentially interpersonal disputes.

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Substantiative Issues

- The very reason for forming groups in organizations can contribute to group conflict. Organizations should use the energy of diverse individuals to establish effective ways of doing things or to challenge existing processes in favor of new and better efforts. In effect, organizations should encourage conflicts of ideas that contribute to excellence. Individuals normally and productively can differ about positions, interests, approaches, or problems. Groups can therefore be expected to have conflicts over issues, ideas, or tasks.



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Group Think

- Tendency of groups to suspend critical thinking and too quickly adopt proposed solutions.



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Dissent

- Disagreeing or dissenting (putting voice to disagreement) with organizational policies and practices is common for both individuals and groups. Reasons for dissent vary but often center around change, how performance is evaluated, perceived risk by employees and other stakeholders, overall organizational effectiveness, treatment of employees and stakeholders, decision making, and ethical breaches.
- Organizations vary in their support for dissent expression. Some encourage “speaking up” while others discourage any type of public voicing of concerns.

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Group Conflict Management Processes

- Group conflict is so important in organizations that a variety of processes for management have become commonplace. **These processes are typically described as negotiation, bargaining, mediation, forcing, and arbitration.** Although this chapter does not describe these processes in detail, your awareness that they are frequently used becomes part of your knowledge competency for group participation.



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Negotiation

- is a common process in groups. Generally speaking, negotiation can be understood as a broad process involving discussions between and among individuals who are interdependent and need to come together for a decision or course of action. Groups negotiate procedures and issues with expected give-and-take among members. The negotiation process is frequently associated with the need to compromise effectively



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Bargaining

- is a more structured form of negotiation. Bargaining usually involves the presentation of fairly specific proposals for the purpose of achieving a working agreement on particular issues. You are probably familiar with collective bargaining as it applies to labor and management group interactions. Yet bargaining has numerous other organizational applications. At budget time, groups may be asked to present very specific proposals for money. Representatives from each group may be asked to negotiate or bargain for fixed resources. In some cases the rules for these exchanges will be well defined, whereas in others the process is more open-ended. Regardless of the formality, bargaining is an established conflict resolution procedure in many organizations.



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Mediation

- is another possible group conflict management process. In mediation a designated individual guides the negotiations or bargaining efforts of the groups in conflict. Mediation is used when negotiations are deadlocked or tensions so high that a designated leader is desirable. When mediation fails, the designated leader frequently has to rely on forcing or making a decision that the group must accept. Obviously, for mediation or forcing to be effective, the designated leader must have credibility with the opposing factions and responsibility and authority appropriate to the task. Generally speaking, mediators are members of the group or organization involved in the process.

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Third Party Arbitration

- Finally, when negotiation, bargaining, or mediation fails, organizations can manage group conflict with third-party arbitration. Arbitration usually involves an outside negotiator who resolves differences with formally established procedures. Labor–management disputes have been subjects of arbitration, as have a variety of legally related cases. Arbitration frequently results in ill will because of the forced nature of resolving the conflict.



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Power and Organizational Conflict

- The organizational structure itself represents how formal power is intended to work. The organizational chart defines for the formal power structure who has the right to overrule whom and who makes decisions and resolves disagreements when collaboration or compromise breaks down.
- Organizational ideology, values, and culture influence conflict. Formal power relationships rarely explain, however, the complexity of organizational conflict. Informal leaders, coalitions of individuals with special relationships, politics, and assumptions of superiority all influence conflict processes. We see individuals and groups with excellent ideas submitting to the ideas of more powerful organizational members and groups.
- We observe what we call power plays in all types of organizational situations. Power plays can be described as tactics that make explicit how power should be viewed in particular circumstances in order to preserve the position of the person or persons making the “play.”



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Conflict with Customers and Vendors

- Responding to the irate customer is a test of our abilities to critically assess the situation, exhibit effective conflict management skills, and understand the limits of our responsibility to handle the situation. Although every organization has differing expectations about customer contact, it is important to clarify those expectations and learn from particularly unpleasant situations.
- Managers need to know that when consumers take the time to write a complaint letter, it is beneficial to respond. In addition, it is important for people who respond to complaints to consider the content of their responses. That is, although responders might want to use excuses, justifications, and apologies to explain failure episodes to aggrieved customers, they should be aware of the potential reactions to these responses.
- Organizational vendors provide another potential challenge. Vendors provide services or products to an organization. When problems occur, the interaction with the vendor is critical to solving the problem.

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Special Types of Organizational Conflict: Sexual Harassment, Discrimination, and Ethical Abuses

- Although sexual harassment, discrimination, bullying and mobbing, and numerous types of ethical abuses all have legal consequences beyond the scope of this conflict discussion, they also can be viewed as important types of organizational conflicts.
- Virtually all organizations have policies prohibiting sexual harassment, discrimination, and ethical abuses, yet the prevalence of these actions affects literally thousands of workers each year. The impact on individuals can be severe, but less well understood is the impact these negative conflicts have on the overall effectiveness



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Sexual Harassment

- Sexual harassment is an important example of power abuse that generates negative conflict. Gerald Pepper (1995) provided a useful definition of this conflict-producing abuse: Sexual harassment refers to situations in which one person persists in behaving in a way that offends the sexual morals of another or creates an expectation on the part of the harassed that his or her employment conditions are subject to change if the victim does not respond as the harasser desires. Harassment can also take the form of an overall working environment that is permeated with offensive behavior or materials. Sexual harassment may be physical or psychological, may occur between same or different-sex individuals, may happen to both women and men, and is not a condition of hierarchical level

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Sexual Harassment

- As Debbie Dougherty (2008) described, “Targets of the behavior have always known, and researchers have confirmed, that sexual harassment is a highly destructive workplace process. It creates stress, severe depression, and other health problems for the target and anxiety for all members of the workplace and costs millions, possibly billions to organizations in terms of increased health care costs, lost productivity, legal fees, training, and replacing targets of sexual harassment who leave the workplace to escape the predatory sexual behavior by colleagues. Sexual harassment, even less aggressive forms, is never a good thing” (p. 463).

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Discrimination

- Discrimination in the workplace is both a legal and a cultural issue. Discrimination can be defined as the systematic exclusion of individuals based on characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, and age. Sometimes referred to as labor market discrimination, discrimination in the workplace is based on personal characteristics of workers that are not related to productivity. As with sexual harassment, discrimination is illegal, and most organizations take public stands against a variety of discriminatory practices.

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Whistle- Blowing

- Employees increasingly report ethical abuses to those in positions of power. These reporting behaviors are referred to as whistle-blowing, or the disclosure of illegal and unethical behaviors to those who can do something about them. Reporting unethical behavior is a complicated ethical issue. Should the whistle-blower report his or her finding internally and wait for results, or should the whistle-blower go directly to the public? The answer is not simple. The decisions individuals make about either the knowledge of or participation in ethical abuses will not only influence their own career satisfaction but also directly affect the performance of the organization.



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Productively Engaging in Conflict

- Thus far in this chapter, we have attempted to develop knowledge, sensitivity, and skills important for communication competence during conflict. The underlying assumption for this development has been that conflict can be productive and can make a valuable contribution to individuals and organizations. In other words, not only is conflict inevitable, but also, when productive, often it is desirable. Before thinking specifically about possible positive outcomes of conflict, review again the conflicts you identified earlier in this chapter and in the Emerson Publishers case. Were there positive outcomes from your personal conflicts? What do Amy and the entire department have to gain from productive resolution of their problem? How was conflict valuable in either your personal experiences or the Emerson Publishers case?
- In general, it can be said that a major value of conflict is its stimulus for creativity. Conflict with others forces us to evaluate and assess issues and problems. When productively managed, this evaluation can stimulate new and creative solutions that may not have emerged without competing perspectives.

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Contribute to Supportive and Ethical Enviroments for Conflict

- Creating an environment in which individuals feel secure and encouraged to seek good solutions is a difficult yet important task. The quality of the problem-solving environment is closely linked to considerations of what constitutes ethical communication behaviors during conflict
- This subtle but critical relationship between supportive climates and the quality of human interaction is well described by Paul Keller and Charles Brown (1968) in their interpersonal ethic for communication. Keller and Brown suggested people will be able to reach their potential only when they are psychologically free—not fearful of disagreement—and when their beliefs, opinions, and values are acceptable in their interactions with others.



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Evaluation Versus Problem Description

- Defensive climates are described by Gibb (1982) as evaluative, whereas supportive environments are characterized by problem description. The descriptive approach attempts to fit our words as nearly as possible to our experience of reality through descriptive, nonjudgmental terms and by avoiding strong, emotion-laden words. There is a big difference between a boss who says, “You people are wasteful!” and one who says, “Our office costs are rising rapidly because of the amount of copying we do.”

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Control Versus Problem Orientation

- Defensiveness also is produced through attempts to control the behavior and responses of others. Although forcing may get short-term results, it rarely builds long-term improvement. Problem orientation is the supportive climate opposite of control. Specifically, problem orientation attempts collaboration with individuals who are being asked to make behavior changes. Think about the difference between the supervisor who says, “Get here on time or else!” and the one who says, “How can we work together to make sure you start your shift on time?” Most of us can understand the problem orientation approach in our own behavior. Try to determine when your commitment is greater: when you participate in a decision or when the decision is made for you. For most of us the answer is relatively simple: we put more time and energy into our own commitments



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Strategy versus Spontaneity

- Although we all operate from strategic objectives in conflict, defensiveness is produced when we are perceived by others to be engaging in manipulative behaviors. A boss who tries to “sell” a group on an unpopular change in work requirements often produces a defensiveness based on the belief this manipulation is a fundamental form of disrespect. Spontaneity, the opposite of strategy, is reflected in behaviors that make real motives plain and generate a trust that straightforward and honest interactions are taking place. A group may not like the announcement of a schedule change, but the boss who directly provides the reasons without suggesting everyone should like the decision is more likely to generate trust. Straightforward and honest interactions (spontaneity) facilitate an individual’s freedom of choice through accurate information, a requirement for ethical interpersonal communication.



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Neutrality Versus Empathy

- Productive groups empathically support their members rather than assuming a rational neutrality based on “pure” objectivity
- Productive groups also are characterized by the acceptance of others with different values and beliefs. This empathic support is closely related to the Keller and Brown (1968) notion of an interpersonal ethic for communication based on psychological freedom to express opinions and beliefs. Thinking again about our personal behavior, most of us would agree it is more comfortable to express disagreement when we know we will be thoughtfully heard than when we expect personal attack or discounting. Also, for most of us, constructively expressing disagreement is more likely to occur when we feel supported in our right to do so.



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Superiority Versus Equality

- In general, defensive groups are more likely than supportive groups to have members intent on asserting superiority and exhibiting an unwillingness to participate equally in problem solving. In fact, defensive climates often are characterized by individuals who believe they really do not have enough in common with others to make communication possible. Although differences in individuals exist, supportive individuals and groups stress commonalities while respecting numerous and diverse contributions to solutions.



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Certainty Versus Provisionalism اليقين مقابل المؤقتة

- Defensive groups, more than their supportive counterparts, are likely to have members who are certain and dogmatic about their positions. Supportive individuals are more provisional or open to experimentation in behavior, attitudes, and ideas. The provisional individual is investigative and problem-oriented rather than polarized into either-or positions. The provisional approach seeks numerous alternatives so as to find the most appropriate solution to a given problem. Again, this support for the generation of alternatives is fundamental to individual choice and ethical communication.

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Ethical Communication Behavior

- Ethical conflict behaviors are exhibited when the individual stays with the issue at hand without hidden agendas; constructs reasonable, logical arguments rather than arguments designed to discount and devalue others; and keeps an open mind to new ideas while avoiding a win-at-all-costs attitude. In other words, ethical communication behaviors generate an environment in which individuals have freedom of expression and also have adequate information to make free, informed choices. Put another way, the value of productive conflict is to stimulate creativity in individuals, groups, and organizations. That creativity is most likely to emerge if we are personally safe, if we are open to many suggestions and viewpoints, and if we honestly seek the best solution from among numerous alternatives.

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Monitor your Personal Behavior and the Behavior of others for Signs of Destructive Conflict

- What are you and others doing to contribute to destructive conflict? Folger, Poole, and Stutman (1993) identified symptoms of escalation or avoidance cycles. Avoidance behaviors include marked decrease in commitment to solving the problem; quick acceptance of a suggested solution; avoidance of raising controversial aspects of any issue; people stop listening; discussion stays on safe aspects of the issue; little new information is exchanged; no plans are made to implement solutions; and evidence for claims or positions is not challenged.
- Escalation behaviors include dogmatically arguing for the same position; taking longer than anticipated to deal with issues; threats used to win arguments; mounting tension; nothing being solved despite hard work; hostile nonverbal communication; sarcastic behavior to relieve tension; and arguments over trivial issues.

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Identify Common Goals and Interests between People or in Groups

- Try to think about problems in terms of common interests and goals. Avoid thinking about concrete positions and focus on common needs, desires, concerns, or fears. In organizations, legitimate and constructive disagreement often occurs about ways to implement solutions or to achieve goals. Identifying common interests and goals helps people avoid blaming and identifying other people as the problem. When people are the problem, it is important to learn to deal directly with the individual or individuals involved and not let “people conflict” contribute to poor organizational decisions.



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Develop Norms to Work on Problems

- Norms or rules of behavior during a problem discussion can contribute to productive conflict by assisting individuals to identify how they will work on the problems with behaviors likely to facilitate informed decisions. Frequently adopted norms include (1) everyone in the group being responsible for assisting everyone else in presenting individual opinions; (2) avoiding win/lose statements; (3) avoiding suppression of differences by using procedures such as voting, averaging, and formal rules; (4) avoiding quick solutions; (5) making decisions only after alternative perspectives have been discussed; and (6) supporting differences of opinion and valuing diverse contributions for effect

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Work on Problem Identification and Definition

- Effective conflict outcomes occur in solving the basic problem rather than finding solutions to surface issues or discovering vastly different descriptions of the problem. Conflict participants should be encouraged to define the problem fully before any discussion of solution strategies. Problems often are poorly described because of underlying tension in the setting and a desire to get the confrontation over with as soon as possible.
- Clarification of the problem—through self-disclosure and active questioning—is essential to productive problem solving

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Focus on Mutual Gain

- Focusing on mutual gain has been described as principled negotiation based on ethical communication behaviors and supportive climates.
- principled negotiation is a strategy for groups of individuals in conflict to express their needs and search for alternatives that meet diverse needs. The strategy supports ethical behavior by separating people from the problem and focusing on interests, not positions. Group members are asked to develop options for mutual gain based on mutual interests. In addition, objective criteria are used to evaluate options so that all parties to the conflict can determine the fairness of decisions



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Set a Meeting to Work on Conflict

- The setting of the meeting beforehand and the environment of the meeting itself are critical to this supportive climate. Generally speaking, all parties involved in conflict should be notified in advance about the issue for discussion. Although that will sometimes produce anticipation stress, mental preparation can occur only when everyone knows the agenda.
- In addition, the meeting environment should be conducive to the free exchange of ideas, usually private and on relatively neutral ground. Individuals using the power position of their private offices may actually inhibit real problem solving. Finally, adequate time for full discussion should be allotted, with the timing of the meeting as convenient as possible for all participants

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Develop Solutions and Narrow the Choices for Action

- In the development of solutions it is important to think broadly about all alternatives, even those that seem to have little immediate merit. Better and longer-lasting solutions will emerge from broad rather than narrow perspectives of alternatives.
- All conflict participants should be encouraged to participate in solution generation. In fact, if a critically involved party to a dispute cannot offer a single solution, it may be better to adjourn the meeting temporarily to let that person consider what he or she might suggest.

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Commit to Solutions

- Agreeing on a solution or approach to the problem should occur only after the parties assess how that solution addresses the identified problem, whether individuals can support the decision, if those most affected have participated in the decision, and whether the solution is workable and can be implemented.
- Commitment to the solution comes through developing an implementation plan.

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Monitor the Process

- A real key to long-term conflict resolution is effective implementation of agreed-on solutions. Effective conflict outcomes are encouraged when participants establish how they will monitor the implementation plan and when they will meet again to assess how it is working.
- This follow-up builds accountability into the process and also allows for celebration when solutions work and meet problem needs. This closure on the process also establishes a framework for revisiting an issue for which the solution—even if faithfully implemented—still does not satisfy the real needs of the conflict.



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