Chapter One

Introduction to the Study of Conflict

Chapter Summary

Our goal in this first chapter is to introduce the student to the study of interpersonal conflict. Conflict is a problematic situation that occurs between interdependent people who seek different goals or means to those goals. Two additional characteristics of conflict are that the perceived differences have the potential to adversely affect the relationship if not addressed and that there is a sense of urgency about the need to resolve the differences. Our definition broadens the study of conflict because nonverbal messages can adversely affect relationships as much as verbal ones like arguing and bickering. Problematic situations that are examples of conflicts include avoiding the other person or topic and glaring at the other person or giving the other a “silent treatment.”

Conflict management is the communication behavior we employ based on our analysis of a conflict situation. In addition, a productive view of conflict situations includes flexibility and the belief that all conflicting parties can achieve their important goals. We may not realize it at the time, but constructive responses to conflict situations are inherent in (all) most conflict situations. When action is called for, there are appropriate actions that can produce positive, constructive, and favorable outcomes.

Learning Objectives

At the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

* Define interpersonal conflict and give examples of conflict situations.
* Define conflict management and explain how it has the potential to convert potentially destructive interpersonal conflicts into productive ones.
* Explain why the transactional model of communication is preferable to the linear model for managing conflict situations
* Define processand pick a successfully resolved conflict to describe in terms of the five stages of constructive, successful conflict.
* Explain why many people view conflict negatively and how they could view it positively.
* Define civility and explain why it is a problem today and what can be done about it.

Key Terms

**accuracy** to what extent was the message received similar to what was “intended or sent”?

**adversely affect relationships** occurs when conflict makes people feel uncomfortable, dissatisfied, and desire exiting the relationship.

**civility** is constituted by an attitude of respect toward others manifested in our behavior toward them; that respect is not predicated on how we feel about them in particular.

**conflict communication** is a process of exchanging verbal and nonverbal messages in a conflict situation that starts with antecedents, moves through steps, and ends with consequences

**conflict management** isthe behavior a person employs based on his or her analysis of a conflict situation.

**conflict metaphor** happens when one is asked to compare one term (conflict) with something else (struggle, exploding bombs, being on trial).

**conflict resolution** refers to only one alternative in a conflict situation in which the parties solve a problem or issue.

**cycle** of behavior exists when people get a sense of repetitiveness in behavior.

**destructive conflict** occurs when there is an expansion of the issues, number of people involved, costs to the participants, and intensity of negative feelings.

**differentiation phase** or ongoing interaction pattern occurs when the participants work out the problem using constructive or destructive strategies and tactics presenting both sides of the story, moving back and forth, and escalating and de-escalating.

**incompatible outcomes/goals** occur when we are seeking different outcomes; for example, we want to buy two different cars but we can only afford one.

**incompatible means** occur when we want to achieve the same goal but differ in how we should do so;for example, we agree on the same car, but not whether to finance it or pay cash.

**inevitability of conflict principle** means that we should cease our efforts to find perfect people and learn how to manage the conflicts we are sure to have with those closest to us.

**initiation phase** is where at least one person makes known to the other the presence of a felt conflict.

**interdependence** occurs when the relationship would be characterized by all involved in it as one that is important and one that is worth the effort to maintain.

**interpersonal conflict** is defined as a problematic situation with the following four unique characteristics: the conflicting parties are interdependent; perceive that they seek incompatible goals or outcomes or they favor incompatible means to the same ends; the perceived incompatibility has the potential to adversely affect the relationship if not addressed; there is a sense of urgency about the need to resolve the difference.

**linear view of communication** studies communication by focusing on message senders as the starting point and message receivers as the end point.

**meta-conflict** **perspective** means that we lookon the conflicts we have experienced, analyze what we did well and what we did poorly, and learn from our mistakes.

**negative view of conflict** seesconflicts as painful occurrences that are personally threatening and best avoided or quickly contained.

**positive view of conflict** happens whenwe see an interpersonal conflict situation as an opportunity to resolve problems and improve our relationships with the people who mean the most to us.

**prelude to conflict** is known as the frustration or latent stage in the conflict management process.

**problematic situations** occur when partners perceive that they seek different outcomes or they favor different means to the same ends.

**process** is a series of steps, phases, stages, actions, operations, or functions bringing about a result, such as the process of registering for classes or the process of obtaining life insurance.

**process view of conflict** recognizes that a conflict is ongoing, dynamic, changeable, moving through steps or phases, and never ending.

**productive** **conflict** occurs when a conflict is kept to the issues, and there is no escalation.

**resolution phase** is where those involved in a conflict agree to some outcome.

**transactional view of communication** views communication as an interactive process by which people make or create meaning together.

**triggering event** is a behavior that at least one person in the conflict points to as the “beginning” of the problem.

Chapter Outline

I. Overview to conflict

A. Communication as a discipline offers a wide variety of pedagogical tools for successfully managing conflict situations.

B. Communication scholars are sensitive to ethical concerns as they create solutions to challenges such as conflict

C. The purpose of this textbook is to apply a communication approach to the study of conflict.

D. Conflict is life as usual. People regularly experience times when their wants and desires are contradictory to the wants and desires of people important to them.

[Objective #1: Define interpersonal conflict and give examples of conflict situations.]

II. Defining interpersonal conflict

A. Characteristics of conflict

1. the conflicting parties are interdependent

2. they have the perception that they seek incompatible goals or outcomes or they favor incompatible means to the same ends

3. the perceived incompatibility has the potential to adversely affect the relationship if not addressed

4. there is a sense of urgency about the need to resolve the difference.</

B. interpersonal conflicts occur with people who are important to us.

III. The Inevitability of Conflict

A. Conflict is a fact of life

1. Researchers have identified seven types of emotional, psychological, and material resources that produce satisfaction in long-term romantic relationships

a. love—nonverbal expressions of positive regard, warmth, or comfort

b. status—verbal expressions of high or low prestige or esteem

c. service—labor of one for another

d. information—advice, opinions, instructions, or enlightenment

e. goods—contributions of material goods

f. money—financial contributions

g. shared time—time spent together

2. The inevitability of conflict principle runs contrary to the idea that, if we look long and hard, we can find people with whom we can share conflict-free lives.

B. Interpersonal violence is not a fact of life

1. Every interpersonal conflict carries with it the seeds of abuse.

2. As many as 35 percent of high-school students experience a physical altercation in a year’s time.

[Objective #2: Define conflict management and explain how it has the potential to convert potentially destructive interpersonal conflicts into productive ones. ]

IV. Defining Conflict Management and Skills

A. Conflict management is the communication behavior a person employs based on his or her analysis of a conflict situation.

B. Conflict resolution refers to only one alternative in which parties solve a problem or issue and expect that it will not arise again.

C. Communication skills may be viewed as the successful performance of a communicative behavior…[and] the ability to repeat such a behavior

D. The ability to take a meta-conflict perspectivemeans that you can look back on the conflicts you have experienced, analyze what you did well and what you did poorly, and learn from your mistakes.

[Objective #3: Explain why the transactional model of communication is preferable to the linear model for managing conflict situations]

V. Communication Processes in Conflict

A. A linear model of communication uses the words *sender*, *receiver*, *channel*, *noise*, and *feedback*

1. Implies that interpersonal conflict is something we *do to* someone. For example, we might take a position and try to convince the other of our view.

2. Our focus is on the end result, which means getting the other to change his or her mind or behavior to coincide with our position.

3. Using a linear model to explain conflict often results in trying to fix the “blame” of the conflict situation on one person or another, not recognizing that both people in a conflict situation contribute to the emergence of the conflict.

B. A transactional model of communication emphasizes managing and coordinating.

1. Conflict something we *do to* one another, but something we *do with* one another (like teamwork).

2. A conflict is not seen as something that happens when one person “sends” a message to another indicating that he or she is unhappy with some behavior of the other.

3. Conflict is seen as the behaviors of each person, in response to one another, exchanging messages, hearing each other out, cooperating, and conjointly creating an understanding in which both people perceive themselves as being in conflict with one another, mutually sharing responsibility for the conflict situation, and working together to better deal with it.

[Objective #4: Define processand pick a successfully resolved conflict to describe in terms of the five stages of constructive, successful conflict. ] See text for definition.

VI. Destructive and Productive Conflict Communication Processes

A. The nature of Process: A process is dynamic, ongoing, and continuous (not static, at rest, or fixed). It is evolutionary in nature. Viewing objects, people,

events, and social situations as processes means that we understand:

B. Processes have stages or phases of development through growth or deterioration.

1. They have a history in which a distinctive pattern emerges.
2. They consist of continual change over time.
3. They have ingredients that interact (affect one another) that may or may not lead to the next stage (depending on the ingredients).
4. At any given point in time and space, they represent some outcome, stage, or state of being (like a picture or a single frame in a film).
5. The stages of a successful conflict are prelude, trigger, initiation, differentiation, resolution

C. Destructive conflict as a tendency to expand and escalate the conflict to the point where it often becomes separated from the initial cause and takes on a life of its own.

D. Productive conflict occurs when a conflict is kept to the issue and to those involved. It reduces the costs to the participants and the intensity of negative feelings. It includes helping the other person and letting go of past feelings

[Objective #5: Explain why many people view conflict negatively and how they could view it positively.]

VII Negative View of Conflict

A. Negative view of conflict: The idea that conflicts are painful occurrences that are personally threatening and best avoided or quickly contained.

B. Positive view of conflict: where we see it as an opportunity to resolve problems and improve our relationships with the people who mean the most to us.

C. Conflict metaphor, compares one term (*conflict*) with something else (struggle, exploding bombs, being on trial). Metaphors are not only figures of speech but also a reflection of how we think.

[Objective #6: Define civility and explain why it is a problem today and what can be done about it. ]

VIII. Civility

1. Civility is constituted by an attitude of respect toward others manifested in our behavior toward them; that respect is not predicated on how we feel about them in particular.
2. Civility requires that we are mindful of others around us and aware of the impact our behavior has on them.

In-Class/Out-of-Class Activities

Experiential Activity: Reward Poster (see form at end of this manual Chapter 1)

**This activity is more effective if you complete it yourself first.**

**Goals**

1. To help students identify the skills they need to improve in conflict situations

2. To create a sense of camaraderie with respect to skill improvement

**Time required:** One hour

**Materials needed:** Colored markers or crayons, “Reward Poster” for each student

**Instructions**

1. Have students draw a self-representation in the box. It doesn’t have to be beautiful, artistic, or even a person. They should just draw something that represents themselves.
2. Next, have students decide the amount of reward offered for their capture, and have them fill in the other details.
3. Information should be related to “conflict crimes”—that is, students should be encouraged to identify skills that need improvement such as “Always Being”—Too Quick to Speak; “Having a Strong Need For”—Being Heard; “Living by the Slogan”—It’s Always Best to be Right.
4. Have students present their posters to the class.
5. Identify any common themes among the posters.

Experiential Exercise: Stand Where You Stand

This exercise can be done with any topic. Here, the topic of physical violence is used.

1. Create five signs that indicate the level of agreement people might have with the topic of physical violence. For example, they might say

1. I think physical violence is never justified
2. I think physical violence should be the last resort
3. I am undecided on whether physical violence is justified or not
4. I think physical violence, when used sparingly, can be very useful in teaching others.
5. I think physical violence is justified whenever a person feels a threat to himself/herself.

2. Post the signs around the room and have students stand under the sign that best represents their attitudes. If you have a large enough class and some positions not taken, you can either ask for volunteers to take the positions not chosen to simply work with the range you have.

3. Give students 5 minutes to discuss in each of the position groups why they took the position that they did. Advise them that they will have to explain their position.

4. Before students explain, tell them that, if they feel that their opinions are changing as they listen to other groups, they are free to move to a new position that suits their thinking better.

5. Each group should explain the content of its position and argue as to why that position is most reasonable.

6. Use the discussion to unpack the critical concepts around violence and its place (or not) in the conflict situation.

Essay Questions

1. Write an essay in which you apply the ideas presented in Chapter 1 to your life situation. Be sure to address the following topics.

1. Define interpersonal conflict, and give an example of your own recent conflicts.
2. Explain your view of conflict (ranging from negative to positive) before taking this course.
3. Explain why conflict is a fact of life for you personally.
4. Explain why violence is not a fact of life for you personally.
5. Define conflict management, and give an example of your own recently managed conflict.

Explain how more effective conflict management might make the above example of a conflict more productive.

2. Write an essay that addresses the pros and cons of physical violence. When is violence justified? When is it not? Do you think people resort to violence more frequently or less frequently than they should? Why?

Additional Instructional Materials

Internet Videos

Anger isn’t pretty:  
<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=2172910017768122721>

Media clip about common conflict: <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=9136093905789810321&q=%22conflict%22&hl=en>

Forms on following pages

Reward Offered

$$$$

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ is wanted for. . .

Always being:

Having a strong need for:

Living by the slogan: