YOU TALKING TO ME...?
Conflict Resolution

C✶MPASS

A Roadmap To Healthy Living

RECOGNIZE CONFLICT

As you begin college, one thing you might be thinking about is how you will get along with others and how some of your relationships with friends and family might change. Whether you live in the residence halls, off campus, or at home, you will need to know how to manage relationships with fellow students, roommates, and family members. You will need to effectively adjust to changes with your family. You should also take into consideration the conflicts that might arise at school (class projects or student organizations) or at work (team projects or with your boss). No matter how well you know yourself, situations can get tricky when you deal with others, especially if you disagree. While agreeing with other points of view is not always necessary, developing your skills in effective conflict management is essential.

How do you feel when you're in conflict with someone? Irritated? Frustrated? Angry? These are all human emotions with value that can be used toward a positive end. You may feel that conflict can only be negative, but this will most likely lead you to avoid conflicts. And avoiding conflict often causes more problems than working to solve it. Remember that conflict presents opportunity. Managing conflict gives you a chance to solve problems, improve the way you function in your work and personal relationships, and learn more about yourself and others. For starters, it can help all parties involved feel better about themselves and their relationships. When you learn how to handle yourself in stressful situations, you won't become frustrated with everyday misunderstandings, power struggles, or personal slights. You may also learn something from how you react to challenging situations, or perhaps learn about another person's culture or background. All can enhance your overall college and life experiences.

So, what is conflict? Organizational and interpersonal communication theorists define conflict as the interaction of interdependent people who perceive that they have

incompatible goals, and who see the other party as potentially interfering with the realization of these goals. This definition has three important features, often called "the three I's:" Interaction, Interdependence, and Incompatibility. Conflict is inevitable. It is a natural and necessary part of human social life and is an important producer of critical thinking. Conflict itself is neither good nor bad; what makes it good or bad is the way we handle it.

Finally, thinking about conflict "management" is more productive than thinking about conflict "resolution." Conflict will never be "resolved" in the sense that there will always be some kind of conflict (as defined by the three I's) in human relationships. This simple language shift can help you to accept conflict as a natural part of social life that is not necessarily negative, but arises whenever humans with a multiplicity of goals interact.

Many people think conflict is a negative, destructive, unhealthy, and anxiety-producing experience. But that thinking masks the genuine benefits of conflict. Conflict is an important part of making good decisions. A person or group that is unwilling to face conflict is going to reject new ideas that are different from their settled-on ways. Conflict stimulates critical thinking and makes change possible. So, conflict itself is not negative, destructive, unhealthy, or anxiety- producing, but our conflict communication might be. Constructive communication helps us to manage conflict successfully, and, when managed successfully, conflict actually makes interpersonal and work relationships stronger. So, each time a conflict is managed successfully, individuals become closer and more confident that they can handle conflict. This makes them more willing to engage in the conflict process in the future. The willingness to engage in conflict is a crucial factor for success because conflict promotes critical thinking and enhances innovativeness in decision-making.

Conflict is a problem that is best managed with the joint effort of all involved parties. When you have a conflict with someone, you have a problem together. Competent conflict management can thus be seen as joint problem solving. With this in mind, the other party should be thought of as a teammate rather than an enemy—especially since you need each other to achieve your goals!

SOURCES OF CONFLICT

Sources of conflict can be easily thought of in three basic categories: Substantive, Affective, and Procedural.

Substantive conflict is based on a goal directly or on issues related to the goal. People interact to achieve many goals, whether it is deciding what equipment to purchase at

work or what movie to see with a group of friends. The main goal in most interaction is to make a decision on an issue or solve a problem. However, a task can be complex and made up of many smaller tasks (sub-tasks), each of which has its own set of goals (sub-goals). Individuals engaged with figuring out the nature of the task will each have his/her own view of the goals and sub-goals for its successful completion.

Affective conflict is emotional. Although all conflict has an emotional component, goal displacement occurs when emotional goals that are not related to the task take precedence. One person may become angry or hurt because he/she believes another's behavior is inappropriate. If I agree with what you say, but I think you are "out of line" or that it is "not your place" to say it, we might have affective conflict. Such conflict can be a form of politics, which is related to power. Affective conflict occurs when people try to hurt each other, often because someone's feelings have been hurt. This might have happened at the time or at some time previously. This has been called nonrealistic conflict; conflict itself becomes the goal.

Finally, *procedural conflict* occurs when people do not agree on how to go about a task. Procedural conflict can easily escalate into affective conflict.

Notice that all three types meet the three-I's criteria. Interaction must take place, interdependence is intact, and, at some level, individual goals are incompatible. A single conflict event may stem from more than one source.

CONFLICT STYLES

A great deal of conflict research has been based on the idea that we each have a particular tendency to deal with all our conflicts in the same way time after time. Five basic conflict styles are often identified by thinking along two task dimensions: Assertiveness and Cooperativeness. Assertiveness describes how strongly you show concern for your own goals. Cooperativeness describes how strongly you show concern for the other person's goals. High assertiveness with low cooperativeness is called competing. High cooperativeness with low assertiveness is called accommodating. The style with low levels of both is avoiding; that with high levels of both is collaborating; and that with moderate levels of both is compromising. It is far better to choose a conflict style to match a situation, rather than to just fall back on your natural predisposition. By adapting your style to the situation, you can make an active attempt to handle the conflict, rather than letting it handle you.

The appropriate balance between assertiveness and cooperativeness is complicated. Provided that the parties in conflict have a thorough understanding of each other's position, the success of each style depends on the situation. It is very important to use good communication to check your perceptions to be sure you understand the situation accurately. (This is addressed below.)

Remember also that you must pay attention to emotions. Emotion is neither good nor bad in itself; rather, what is important is the way we deal with emotion. By striving for an awareness of our own emotions, as well as those of others, we prevent affective conflict and goal displacement. It is very important to express emotions, particularly negative ones, productively. "I feel ignored and that makes me angry," is much better than screaming, "I refuse to be treated this way," slamming the door as you storm out. The constructive management of conflict requires that we understand our emotions and use them in productive ways. Avoid "you-messages" that will automatically make the other person defensive. Simply state factually the way that you feel and precisely when you feel that way; not: "You are rude, and you make me angry," but "I get angry when you interrupt me because I feel disrespected." Such "I-messages" focus on the feeling and your own experience of it. "You-messages" leave the other person with a direct emotional hit, with the natural reflex of hitting back—at least in self-defense.

Try to pay attention to the way your behavior functions for others, and the ways you might unintentionally bring out emotions in others. For example, some people come from families who debate loudly about everything; but this "natural" behavior may intimidate or anger others from more reserved families. (The film, My Big Fat Greek Wedding, is an excellent dramatization of this kind of cultural interaction.) So, if your friend's love of debate often causes her to passionately argue for her point of view on an issue, others might retreat into silence, respond with anger, or hurry to sooth another's hurt feelings. In such cases, your friend's debating behavior functions as intimidation, even though her intentions are to express her devotion to the community and to uncover the truth about issues. On the other hand, the function of this kind of behavior in another situation may be positive; in the courtroom it functions to impress judges and juries, making your friend a very effective litigator.

STEPS FOR EFFECTIVE CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

Your conscious choice of conflict style is, however, only one of the steps to effective conflict management. The first and most important step is to create a constructive communicative climate as the context for productive conflict management. Next, you should thoroughly analyze the situation before thinking about conflict style; checking

perceptions, determining the source of the conflict, and analyzing the problem issue. Finally, you then work to manage the actual conflict, using compromise as a last resort.

The following steps can be applied to both personal relationships and to interactions between groups or teams.

The process that follows uses group conflict to demonstrate the step working principles:

STEP 1: *Creating a constructive climate*

In a climate of mistrust, hostility, and destructive behavior, defensiveness becomes the order of the day, and a defensive climate is obviously unhealthy and unproductive. On the other hand, a constructive climate equips you to deal with conflict--even when conflict gets out of control. It is best if a constructive climate is established early in the relationship's history—anticipating the inevitability of conflict. To establish a constructive climate, persons in the relationship must value open discussion, emphasize listening to and understanding each other, strive for acceptance of each other as persons, minimize judging one another, support one another's self-esteem, and focus on discussion of issues rather than personalities. The "bottom line" of a constructive climate is that we all have respect for each other. People who respect each other will do the rest naturally. Relationships with mutual respect will have constructive climates. If a conflict should become destructive, we then have norms to "fall back on" that will help us to get back on track.

Constructive conflict management stems from a healthy and constructive climate, but what if you are unable to create such a climate or unable to maintain one? Obviously, a relationship with respectful norms is the ideal, and it is much easier to create such a climate from the start than it is to repair a destructive non-respectful climate. Still, if people are committed to the process of healing, even the most defensive and hostile pair or group can turn themselves around. Take particular note of the wording: turn themselves around. No consultant or counselor can come in and "fix" a dysfunctional relationship. The only people who can create a constructive climate are the people in the relationship.

When caught up in a destructive conflict, you must first diffuse emotions. No one who is "hot under the collar" can think clearly enough to analyze and change a climate. The best way to do this is to take a physical break. The pair or group should end the interaction, but not angrily or suddenly (e.g., "We aren't getting much accomplished today, let's meet tomorrow"). Before leaving, a time and place should be scheduled. It is particularly useful in any work group to set aside time to evaluate the group's progress and talk about problems. (If a group in trouble does not do this type of regular

"climate-check" already, they should start after the troublesome issue has been resolved.) To resolve the troublesome issue, the group should arrange for meetings on neutral ground or any place that is not "home territory" for one of the feuding parties. These meetings should be kept short and frequent until the issue is resolved. During these meetings, the following ground rules for a constructive climate should be clearly spelled out.

Rules for a Constructive Climate

- *Everyone respects everyone else.* A constructive climate, as described above, is enforced. Choose a person who is not embroiled in the dispute to act as a moderator. It may be necessary to bring in an agreed-upon outside person. The moderator does not participate in the discussion, but points out destructive behaviors. The moderator's comments focus on the group's behavior, not its members. For example, if Bob Brown says, "Joanne, you are a pea brain," a moderator would not say, "Mr. Brown is disrespectful." A moderator would focus on behavior, without naming the person directly: "Comments about brain size are not constructive." The group would then simply move on.

- *Avoid destructive cycles.* Try to maintain constructive behaviors, even if others fail at doing so. Here, Joanne should do her best to ignore Bob's comment. Just as hostility begets hostility, calmness begets calmness. If someone shouts at you, your best approach is to reduce your volume, rather than responding with shouts of your own.

- *Everyone talks.* Everyone gets a chance to talk, taking turns, and is given a maximum time limit, loosely enforced by the moderator. The time limit works to keep people from filibustering--that is, talking endlessly not to make a point but to hold the floor and halt meaningful discussion. The moderator can remind those who try to filibuster that their time is up; however, if someone is talking over the limit but others are listening and not showing objections, the moderator should not interrupt. The time limit is decided upon ahead of time. In extremely hostile situations, have everyone suggest a time limit anonymously, in writing, and use the longest time suggested (within reason). Also, in extremely hostile situations, flip a coin or roll dice to determine the order of turn-taking. No one has to talk unless he or she wants to, and there is no minimum time. Turn taking order can be violated only if a person needs to clarify a point; in such cases, the time limit should still be loosely enforced.

- *Perhaps most importantly, maintain a focus on common goals.* Keep reminding each other that you are all focused on the same objectives and that you need one another to achieve them. This is a crucial component of teamwork.

STEP 2: *Check perceptions of group members*

Perception-checking has two basic functions. First, it ensures that there is really a disagreement. This may sound silly, but many instances of perceived conflict are not conflict at all. People have different ways of expressing the same thing, and often perceive these different expressions as disagreement. You may discover that there is no conflict after all. Second, if there is a conflict, perception-checking clarifies the issues and helps the disagreeing parties understand each other's viewpoints.

You can do this by having the parties who "disagree" discuss each viewpoint in turn.

- Randomly choose who talks first (e.g., flip a coin).

- The person who goes first should summarize her view in five minutes.

- The other person then has five minutes to summarize that view while suspending discussion of his own view.

- Then, the first person has five minutes, and the process continues until the first person is satisfied that the second person understands her point.

- Then you do the same thing for the second person's view.

- You may insert a five-minute question and answer period whenever the parties feel the need.

- Be sure that there are no attempts at persuasion, and that only one viewpoint is discussed at one time.

- Remind the two parties that this process is to ensure they understand one another, not to debate the issue or to make any decisions.

By explicitly checking perceptions, we can assure ourselves that we understand each other.

During this process, be an active listener. Active listening plays an important role in managing conflict. It's not about solving the speaker's problem, but an opportunity for the speaker to clarify thoughts, release emotions, and better understand personal feelings. Active listening places the focus on who is talking, regardless of group size, so the listener can best understand what the speaker is saying. This doesn't mean the listener has to agree, but instead should understand what the speaker is saying. Keep in mind that active listening is a learned skill, so it may not come easily.

Keys to active listening:

- *Accept.* Active listening is accepting and nonjudgmental.

- *Focus.* Active listening focuses completely on the speaker.

- *Desire.* Convey the desire to understand what the speaker is feeling and saying. This requires the listener not just to hear the content of the conversation, but to understand the feeling(s) behind the words. It also involves reflecting those feelings back to the speaker.

- *Silence.* Active listening usually requires many moments of silence. This can establish trust and encourages the speaker to continue.

- *Question.* Asking open-ended questions ("How do you feel about that?") promotes healthy dialogue.

- *Concern.* Express genuine concern for the speaker, not for solving the speaker's problem.

Practice active listening by:

- Establishing strong non-verbal cues.

- Being attentive to the speaker's non-verbal cues.

- Asking open-ended questions.

- Paraphrasing what the speaker has said to you ("What I hear you saying is…").

- Clarifying what you don't understand; don't be afraid to ask for more information.

- Allowing silence to exist in the communication.

- Validating and acknowledging the speaker's feelings.

And by avoiding:

- Telling the speaker how to feel.

- Solving the speaker's problem(s).

- Passing judgment or making judgmental statements ("Why were you walking by yourself anyway?").

- Speaking about yourself when you should be listening to the speaker.

- Thinking about what you're going to say next; just listen.

- Telling the speaker that you know how she or he feels.

STEP 3: *Determine the type of conflict*

Based on the perception-checking discussion, discuss whether the conflict is substantive, affective, procedural, or some combination of these. Again, the management of meaning is a crucial issue. This clarification will help the parties orient themselves to the kinds of issues they will be considering as the process continues.

STEP 4: *Analyze the problem issue*

The group should engage in a depersonalized discussion of the issue at stake. The goal of this discussion is to determine the fundamental issues that are at the heart of the disagreement.

Up to this point, no one should argue for or against any point of view. Steps 2, 3, and 4 serve to clarify the issues and ensure that everyone understands all sides of the issue. Once everyone understands the basic issues underlying the conflict, each person individually should consider which viewpoint he or she agrees with. At any point, the conflict may simply end--the process of clarifying the issues may be all that is needed to come to a consensus.

STEP 5: *Manage the actual conflict*

If there is still conflict, decide what individual conflict style will best serve the situation. Separating "compromise" from the other four is suggested.

In situations where "agreeing to disagree" will not impede progress, avoidance is probably best. For example, you may have conflict over which goal is more important, but if you agree that both should be achieved, it does not matter which has precedence. For now, you can agree to disagree and the group can move on. At a later point, however, one goal might have to be sacrificed for the other, and the conflict will need to be dealt with in another way.

Accommodating may be the best approach in cases where the specific issue in dispute is not really important to you or to others, or in cases where you have little stake in the outcome.

Competing may be the best approach when you are an expert who will be held accountable for the outcome and you are in conflict with someone who does not have the expertise to make judgments on the issue. Taking a competing approach means you work on persuading the other person(s) that your idea is better. You can do so most effectively by listening carefully to and developing an understanding of their viewpoints, then methodically showing them the flaws in their proposals and how your way would

be a better way to go. Be sure to focus your critique on your disagreement with the proposals themselves and not the person. Make sure to provide specific and concrete reasons and evidence for your opinion.

Collaborating may be the best approach when you have expertise in one area of the issue, and the other person has expertise in another important and relevant area. When you use a collaborating style, you integrate both viewpoints. A clarification of the basic issues can often result in a set of goals that could be achieved for both sides.

Regardless of which style you choose, others will be competing, accommodating, avoiding, or collaborating. Others may try to persuade you to go along with their views or they may simply agree with you. Because you are not acting in a social vacuum, you must be willing to adapt your behavior (i.e., change your conflict style) as the interaction progresses. Your actions should change to accommodate the best interests of the overall goals.

STEP 6: *Use compromise as a last resort*

Compromise has both good and bad qualities. When at an impasse, compromise can save you; however, compromising means giving something up. Compromise is in the middle--sort of assertive and sort of cooperative. Compromise means each side of the conflict only gets some of what it wants. We often rush to compromise so that we can avoid the emotional tension and uncertainty that conflict brings. However, a mutually beneficial solution might be possible if the above steps are followed first. Applying the rules for a constructive climate can help to reduce anxiety and instill confidence. You should turn to compromise only if at an impasse. After all, in the real world we have deadlines and time constraints. We cannot allow a conflict process to drag on if nothing is getting accomplished. Give the conflict process a chance to produce mutually beneficial solutions. Then, if time constraints become an issue, compromise is a good choice. With compromise we bargain and negotiate, each giving something up in order to gain something else.

REMEMBER NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

Nonverbal communication (communicating information without words) plays an important role in managing conflict. It can imply certain feelings, agreement, or disagreement through gestures and sounds. Nonverbal communication can either be helpful in resolving conflict or hinder the process. This largely depends on what the gestures imply to the people interacting.

Use nonverbal communication during the process keeping the following key points in mind:

- *Posture.* How is the other person sitting? Does he/she seem guarded? Open? Face the other person and lean slightly forward. Keep an equal level (either sitting or standing). Sitting or standing with relaxed arms conveys openness (whereas tense or closed arms suggest defensiveness or defiance). What can you do to make the other person more comfortable?

- *Eye contact.* Is the other person looking directly at you? What does this mean? Could there be some cultural difference that informs the way you should interpret and use eye contact? In U.S. culture, direct eye contact expresses interest and a desire to listen.

- *Facial expression and gestures.* Avoid nervous or fidgety motions. The speaker will be able to sense whether or not you want to listen. Watch for these behaviors in others.

- *A non-distracting environment.* Give the speaker your undivided attention.

CONFLICT: MANAGED

Hopefully, you will become a better listener and learn to judge how your verbal and nonverbal communication is interpreted by others. Appreciating the positive aspects of conflict and the fact that conflict is best managed jointly with the other party can make the entire process more beneficial to you and those around you.

If, in the end, a conflict hasn't been managed or it's too difficult a situation to handle on your own, you may want to consider asking for help. The college environment has many resources to help you manage conflicts. They include diversity specialists, faculty, counselors, residence hall staff, and many other groups and individuals.

Anne M. Nicotera, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
Department of Communication

Lisa H. Farinholt-O'Brien, M.S.W.
Former Area Coordinator
Office of Housing and Residence Life

Reference

Nicotera, A. M. (1996). The management of conflict communication in groups. In L. Frey and K. Barge (Eds.), _Managing group life: Communicating in decision-making groups_ (pp. 102-130). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.