11

Managing Conflict

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

11.1 Describe the nature of conflict and its attributes.

11.2 Explain five styles of handling conflict and how they are communicated.

11.3 Recognize various communication patterns in relational conflicts.

11.4 Describe how gender and culture affect communication during conflict.

11.5 Explain how the conflict management process can ideally resolve interpersonal conflicts.

FEATURES

CHAPTER OUTLINE

Once upon a time, there was a world without conflicts. The leaders of each nation recognized the need for cooperation and met regularly to solve any potential problems. They never disagreed on matters needing attention or on ways to handle these matters, and so there were never any international tensions, and of course there was no war.

Within each nation things ran just as smoothly. The citizens always agreed on who their leaders should be, so elections were always unanimous. There was no social friction among various groups. Age, race, and educational differences did exist, but each group respected the others, and all got along harmoniously.

Human relationships were always perfect. Strangers were always kind and friendly to each other. Neighbors were considerate of each other's needs. Friendships were always mutual, and no disagreements ever spoiled people's enjoyment of one another. Once people fell in love—and everyone did—they stayed happy. Partners liked everything about each other and were able to fully satisfy each other's needs. Children and parents agreed on every aspect of family life and never were critical or hostile toward each other. Each day was better than the one before.

Of course, everybody lived happily ever after.

THIS STORY IS OBVIOUSLY a fairy tale. Regardless of what we may wish for or dream about, a conflict-free world just doesn't exist. Even the best communicators, the luckiest people, are bound to wind up in situations where their needs don't match the needs of others. Money, time, power, sex, humor, aesthetic taste, and a thousand other issues arise and keep us from living in a state of perpetual agreement.

For many people, the inevitability of conflict is a depressing fact. They think that the existence of ongoing conflict means that there's little chance for happy relationships with others. Effective communicators know differently. They realize that although it's impossible to *eliminate* conflict, there are ways to *manage* it effectively. The skillful management of conflict can open the door to healthier, stronger, and more satisfying relationships, as well as to increased mental and physical health (Canary, 2003; Laursen & Pursell, 2009).

WHAT IS CONFLICT?

Stop reading for a moment and make a list of conflicts you've experienced personally. The list will probably show you that conflict takes many forms. Sometimes there's angry shouting, as when parents yell at their children, or vice versa. In other cases, conflicts involve restrained discussion, as in labor–management negotiations or court trials. Sometimes conflicts are expressed through hostile silence, as in the unspoken feuds of angry couples. Finally, conflicts may wind up in physical fighting between friends, enemies, or even total strangers.

Whatever forms they may take, all interpersonal conflicts share certain features. William Wilmot and Joyce Hocker (2014) define **conflict** as

an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from the other party in achieving their goals. The various parts of this definition can help you gain a better understanding of how conflict operates in everyday life.

EXPRESSED STRUGGLE

The definition of conflict requires that all the people involved know that some disagreement exists. You may be upset for months because a neighbor's loud music keeps you awake at night, but no conflict exists until the neighbor learns about your problem. An expressed struggle doesn't have to be verbal. A dirty look, the silent treatment, and avoiding the other person are all ways of expressing yourself. One way or another, both people must know that a problem exists before it fits our definition of conflict.

INTERDEPENDENCE

However antagonistic they might feel, the people in a conflict are connected. The welfare and satisfaction of one depends on the actions of the other(s) (Johnson & Cionea, 2017).

Many conflicts remain unresolved because the people involved fail to understand, accept, and acknowledge their interdependence. You might find a roommate, neighbor, or coworker annoying. But unless you can sever your ties, you need to work out a way to coexist. One of the first steps toward resolving a conflict is to take the attitude that "we're in this together."

Whether it's an outright struggle or a simmering disagreement, conflict is a part of every relationship. ***What conflicts are most important in your life? How successful are you in managing them?***

PERCEIVED INCOMPATIBLE GOALS

All conflicts look as if one person's gain would be another's loss. For instance, consider a neighbor whose music keeps you awake at night. It appears that someone has to lose: Either the neighbor loses the enjoyment of hearing the music at full volume, or else you are still awake and unhappy.

The goals in this situation really aren't completely incompatible—solutions do exist that allow you both to get what you want. For instance, you could achieve peace and quiet by closing your windows or getting the neighbor to close hers. You might use earplugs, or perhaps the neighbor could use earphones. If any of these solutions prove workable, then the conflict disappears.

Unfortunately, people often fail to see mutually satisfying answers to their problems. As long as they *perceive* their goals to be mutually exclusive, the conflict is real, albeit unnecessary.

FOCUS ON RESEARCH

The Dangers of Mind-Reading Expectations

Some communicators approach conflicts with mind-reading expectations, assuming their partners will know why they're upset, even if they haven't explained themselves.

Courtney Wright and Michael Roloff wanted to learn the effects of mind-reading expectations on college students in dating relationships. The researchers used a survey that included items such as "People who love each other know each other's thoughts without a word being said." The participants also responded to questions about emotional reactions, conflict styles, and relational satisfaction.

Not surprisingly, subjects with mind-reading expectations were more likely to become upset with their partners than were those without such expectations. The angrier they became, the more likely they were to use the silent treatment to punish their partners. Their assumption seemed to be "You should know why I'm upset—and if you don't, I'm not going to tell you." The researchers noted that mind-reading expectations and the silent treatment typically led to "problematic relational dynamics."

Talking out problems won't always resolve conflicts. But in general, it's better to constructively explain why you're upset than to assume others can read your mind.

Wright, C. N., & Roloff, M. E. (2015). You should *just know* why I'm upset: Expectancy violation theory and the influence of mind reading expectations (MRE) on responses to relational problems. *Communication Research Reports, 32,* 10–19.

PERCEIVED SCARCE RESOURCES

Conflicts also exist when people believe there isn't enough of something to go around: affection, money, space, and so on. Time is often a scarce commodity. Many people struggle to meet the competing demands of school, work, family, and friends. "If there were only more hours in a day" is a common refrain, and making time for the people in your life—and for yourself—is a constant source of conflict.

INEVITABILITY

Conflicts are bound to happen, even in the best relationships. Common sources of conflict among college roommates include access to each other's personal items and food, how clean/messy the rooms are, who can use what furniture, and how involved they should be in each other's personal lives (Ocana & Hindman, 2004). Conflicts with friends also are typical, with an average of one or two disagreements a day (Burk et al., 2009). Among families, conflict can be even more frequent, whether the topic is money, being on time, who does what chores, how to handle relatives, or how to balance work and family obligations (Huffman et al., 2013).

Because it is impossible to avoid conflicts, the challenge is to handle them effectively when they do arise. Decades of research show that people in both happy and unhappy relationships have conflicts, but that they perceive them and manage them in very different ways (Simon et al., 2008; Wilmot & Hocker, 2014). Unhappy couples argue in ways we catalog as

destructive. They are more concerned with defending themselves than with solving problems. They have little or no empathy for each other, use evaluative "you" language, ignore each other's relational messages, and fail to listen carefully. These destructive conflict patterns can result in poor mental and physical health for the parties involved (Segrin & Flora, 2017).

Many satisfied couples handle their conflicts more effectively. They recognize disagreements as healthy and know that conflicts need to be faced (Ridley et al., 2001; Segrin et al., 2009). Although they may argue vigorously, they use skills such as perception checking to find out what the other person is thinking. They let the other person know they understand the other side of the dispute. These people are willing to admit their mistakes, a habit that contributes to a harmonious relationship and also helps solve the problem at hand. With this in mind, we take a closer look at what makes some conflicts more constructive than others.

Media Clip

Fighting over Scarce Resources: *Empire*

Hip-hop mogul Lucious Lyon (Terrance Howard) must choose one of his three sons to take over Empire Entertainment, the company he founded while an ascendant rapper. His ex-wife, Cookie (Taraji P. Henson), demands a controlling role in the business, which she helped found at great personal cost. With so many family members vying for power, conflicts are inevitable.

Critics have described the series as a primetime soap opera, driven by power-seeking characters with outsize egos and self-serving goals. Rather than collaborating toward a shared goal, the key players compete in ways that produce losers and winners, while creating relational and emotional costs for everyone. Although the financial stakes may be higher than usual, the principle is familiar: When resources are perceived to be scarce, the potential for conflict is great.

CONFLICT STYLES

Most people have default styles of handling conflict—characteristic approaches they take when their needs appear incompatible with what others want. Although our habitual styles work in some situations, they may not work at all in others. What styles do you typically use to deal with conflict? Find out by considering this hypothetical situation.

Cam and Lee have been roommates for several years. Cam is a soccer fan and loves watching games with his friends at every opportunity. Their apartment has a big-screen TV (owned by Cam) in the living room, and it has become a regular gathering spot for viewing. Lee doesn't mind watching an occasional game, but he's annoyed by what seems like endless TV (and endless houseguests). Cam thinks he ought to be able to watch his TV whenever he wants, with whomever he wants. Here are five ways they could handle their conflict, representing five different conflict styles:

- *Avoidance.* Cam and Lee don't discuss the issue again—the prospect of fighting is too unpleasant. Cam has tried to cut back on watching

games with friends but feels cheated. Lee keeps quiet, but when game time rolls around, his feelings of displeasure are obvious.

- *Accommodation*. Lee gives in, saying, "Go ahead and watch all the soccer you want. After all, it's your TV. I'll just go in the bedroom and listen to music." Alternatively, Cam could accommodate by agreeing not to watch soccer at home.
- *Competition*. Cam tries to persuade Lee that watching more soccer will lead to a better understanding of the game, and that Lee will want to watch it more as a result. Lee tries to convince Cam that spending so much time watching TV isn't healthy. Both try to get the other person to give up and give in.
- *Compromise*. The roommates agree to split the difference. Cam gets to watch any and every game at home as long as the friends don't come over. Cam gets soccer; Lee gets relative peace and quiet. Of course, Cam misses his friends, and Lee must still endure hours of Cam's TV viewing.
- *Collaboration*. Cam and Lee brainstorm and discover other alternatives. For example, they decide that the fans could watch some games together at a sports bar. They also realize that if each of Cam's friends could pitch in a modest sum, one of the friends could buy a large-screen TV where they could watch some games (and avoid the sports bar costs). Lee also suggests that he and Cam could watch some non-sports TV together.

These approaches represent the five styles depicted in Figure 11.1, each of which is described in the following paragraphs.

AVOIDANCE (LOSE-LOSE)

Avoidance occurs when people choose not to confront an issue directly. It can be physical (steering clear of a friend after having an argument) or conversational (changing the topic, joking, or denying that a problem exists).

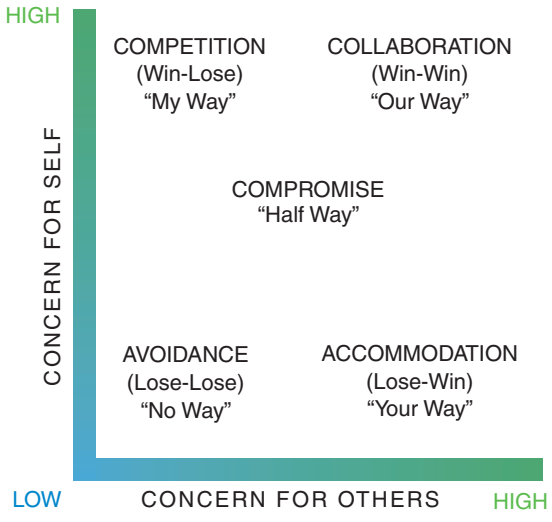


FIGURE 11.1 Conflict Styles

Avoidance generally reflects a pessimistic attitude about conflict. Avoiders usually believe it's easier to put up with the status quo than to face the problem head-on and try to solve it. In the case of Cam and Lee, avoidance means that rather than having another fight, both of them will suffer in silence. Their case illustrates how avoidance often produces lose-lose results.

Although avoiding important issues can keep the peace temporarily, it typically leads to unsatisfying relationships (Afifi et al., 2009; Wang et al., 2012). Partners of "self-silencers" report more frustration and discomfort when dealing with the avoiding partner than with those who face conflict more constructively (Harper & Welsh, 2007). And when avoiders don't voice their complaints, their partners' irritating behaviors may increase, which in turn increases their emotional distress (Liu & Roloff, 2016). Chronic misunderstandings, resentments, and

disappointments pile up and contaminate the emotional climate. For this reason, we can say that avoiders have a low concern both for their own needs and for the interests of the other person, who is also likely to suffer from unaddressed issues (see Figure 11.1).

Despite its obvious shortcomings, avoidance isn't always a bad idea (Caughlin & Arr, 2004; Oduro-Frimpong, 2007). You might choose to avoid certain topics or situations if the risk of speaking up is too great, such as getting fired from a job you can't afford to lose, being humiliated in public, or even suffering physical harm. You might also avoid a conflict if the relationship it involves isn't worth the effort. Even in close relationships, though, avoidance has its logic. If the issue is temporary or minor, you might let it pass. These reasons help explain why the communication of many happily married couples is characterized by "selectively ignoring" the other person's minor flaws (Segrin et al., 2009). This doesn't mean that a key to successful relationships is avoiding *all* conflicts. Instead, it suggests that it's smart to save energy for the truly important ones.

ACCOMMODATION (LOSE-WIN)

Accommodation occurs when we entirely give in to others rather than asserting our own point of view. Figure 11.1 depicts accommodators as having low concern for themselves and high concern for others, resulting in lose-win, "we'll do it your way," outcomes.

The motivation of an accommodator plays a significant role in this style's effectiveness. If accommodation is a genuine act of kindness, generosity, or love, then chances are good that it will enhance the relationship. Most people appreciate those who "take one for the team," "treat others as they want to be treated," or "lose the battle to win the war." However, people are far less appreciative of those who habitually use this style to play the role of "martyr, bitter complainer, whiner, or saboteur" (Wilmot & Hocker, 2014).

We should pause here to mention the important role that culture plays in perceptions of conflict styles. People from high-context, collectivistic backgrounds (such as many Asian cultures) are likely to regard avoidance and accommodation as face-saving and noble ways to handle conflict (Ohbuchi &

DARK SIDE OF COMMUNICATION

Ghosting: The Ultimate Silent Treatment

No text responses. No email replies. No phone calls returned. Blocked on social media. You thought you were close to this person, but communication has been suddenly severed. You've been ghosted.

Ghosting involves ending a relationship by cutting off all contact and ignoring the former partner's attempts to reach out (Safronova, 2015). Although it typically occurs in romantic relationships, ghosting happens in friendships, too (Vilhauer, 2015). One poll found that 11 percent of Americans have been ghosted by a partner; another suggests it's twice that amount or more (Borgueta, 2015).

In terms of conflict styles, ghosting can be an act of passive aggression or simple avoidance. Either way, being summarily rejected can leave scars. Here's how one jilted lover described the wake of being ghosted (Wesley, 2016):

> When you leave without saying a word and without giving us a reason, all we have are more questions. We question ourselves, we question who you really were, and we question our futures. Without being given proper closure, we become more afraid of the next romantic encounter.

It's not always wrong to ghost someone. For example, if you're walking out on an abusive relationship, there's good reason to leave without a trace (Bonos, 2015). However, when you're ending a nonthreatening romance or friendship, it's usually best to say goodbye—or at least say something. In most cases, your relational partner deserves that respect.

"It's not enough that we succeed. Cats must also fail."

Atsumi, 2010). In low-context, individualistic cultures (such as that of the United States), avoidance and accommodation are often viewed less positively. For instance, think of the many unflattering terms that Americans use for people who give up or give in during conflicts ("pushover," "weakling," "doormat," "spineless"). As you will read later in this chapter, collectivistic cultures view these behaviors more favorably. The point here is that all conflict styles have merit in certain situations, and that culture plays a significant role in determining how each style is valued.

COMPETITION (WIN-LOSE)

The flip side of accommodation is **competition**, a win-lose approach to conflict that involves high concern for self and low concern for others. As Figure 11.1 shows, competition seeks to resolve conflicts "my way."

Many Americans default to a competitive approach because it's ingrained in their culture, as one author observes:

> Whether we like it or not, we live in a competitive society. Our economy is competitive by design, and as a nation, we see in competition a challenge to develop our resources and ourselves. (Tracy, 1991, p. 4)

Just as competition can develop an economy, it can sometimes develop a relationship. One study found that some people in dating relationships used competition to enrich their interaction (Messman & Mikesell, 2000). For example, some found satisfaction by competing in play (who's the better racquetball or Scrabble player?), in achievement (who gets the better job offer or the higher grade?), and in altruism (who's more romantic or does the most charity work?). These satisfied couples developed a shared narrative (see Chapter 4) that defined competition as a measure of regard, quite different from conflict that signaled a lack of appreciation and respect. Of course, these arrangements could backfire if one partner became a gloating winner or a sore loser. In addition, feeling like you've been defeated can leave you wanting to get even, creating a downward competitive spiral that degrades to a lose-lose outcome (Olson & Braithwaite, 2004).

If you believe your way is the best one, you may feel justified in trying to control the situation, but it's likely that the other person won't view your bid for control so charitably (Gross et al., 2004). The dark side of competition is that it often breeds aggression (Warren et al., 2005). Sometimes aggression is obvious, but at other times it can be subtler. To understand how, read on.

Passive Aggression

Passive aggression occurs when a communicator expresses dissatisfaction in a disguised manner (Brandt, 2013). In our hypothetical conflict between Lee and Cam (p. 327), perhaps Lee runs the vacuum cleaner

loudly during the soccer matches—or Cam makes sarcastic jokes about Lee not liking sports. Passive aggression can take the form of "crazymaking" (Bach & Wyden, 1983)—tactics designed to punish another person without direct confrontation. Crazymaking takes its name from the effect such behavior usually has on its target.

There are a number of crazymaking ways to deal with conflict. One is through guilt: "Never mind. I'll do all the work myself [sigh]. Go ahead and have a good time. Don't worry about me [sigh]." Another crazymaker is when someone agrees with you to your face but has a different agenda behind your back—such as the teenager who says he'll clean his room and then doesn't do so as a means of getting back at the parent who grounded him. Some passive aggression is nonverbal: a roll of the eyes, a pained expression, or a disdainful laugh can get a message across. If the target of these messages asks about them, the passive aggressor can always deny the conflict exists. Even humor—especially sarcasm ("Gee, I can't *wait* to spend the weekend with your folks")—can be used as passive aggression (Bowes & Katz, 2011). And sometimes saying nothing is a crazymaker weapon. No one likes getting "the silent treatment," and it usually damages interpersonal relationships (Wright & Roloff, 2009).

Watch and Discuss

Look up and watch BuzzFeed-Violet's video "Signs You're the Passive Aggressive Friend."

1) What verbal and nonverbal forms of passive aggression can you spot?
2) Which people in your life (including yourself) regularly use passive aggression in conflict situations? What are some examples?

Direct Aggression

Communicators who engage in **direct aggression** attack the position and dignity of the receiver. Communication scholars list a variety of behaviors that can typify direct aggression: attacks on competence or character, swearing, teasing, ridicule, nonverbal emblems (e.g., "the finger"), and threats (Rancer & Avtgis, 2014). In the case of Lee and Cam, the conflict might turn into an ugly shouting match, with denigrating comments about how only an "idiot" would or wouldn't like sports, watching TV, or having friends over.

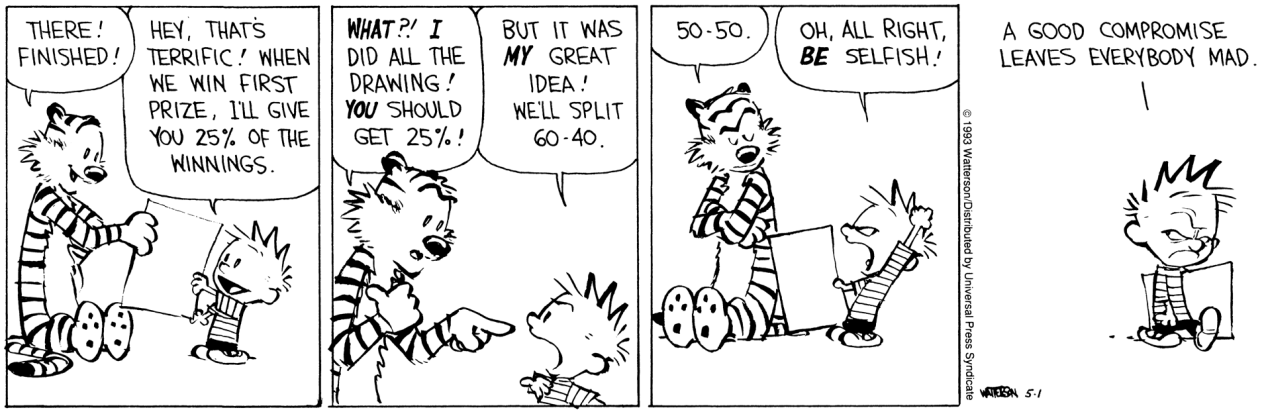
Chapter 12 (page 360) has more to say about the traits and consequences of aggressive communication. For now, it's worth pointing out that a win-lose conflict style can have a high relational cost—especially when the loser is a close friend or loved one. Your victory might be a hollow one if the other party is glum, hurt, or angry about the conflict's outcome.

COMPROMISE

A **compromise** gives both people at least some of what they want, although both sacrifice part of their goals. People usually settle for a compromise when it seems that partial satisfaction is the best they can hope for.

Although a compromise may be better than losing everything, this approach hardly seems to deserve the positive image it often has. One observer (Filley, 1975) makes an interesting observation about attitudes toward this method. Why is it, he asks, that if someone says, "I will compromise my values," we view the action unfavorably, yet we talk admiringly about people in a conflict who compromise to reach a solution? Although compromise may be the best obtainable result in some conflicts, partners in a dispute can often work together to find much better solutions (Jandt, 2017).

Most of us are surrounded by the results of bad compromises. Consider a common example: the conflict between one person's desire to



smoke cigarettes and another's need for clean air. The win-lose outcomes on this issue are obvious: Either the smoker abstains or the nonsmoker gets polluted lungs—neither option a very satisfying one. But a compromise in which the smoker gets to enjoy only a rare cigarette or must retreat outdoors and in which the nonsmoker still must inhale some fumes or feel unaccommodating is hardly better. Both sides have lost a considerable amount of both comfort and goodwill. Of course, the costs involved in other compromises are even greater. For example, if a divorced couple's custody battle leaves them bitter and emotionally scars their children, it's hard to say that anybody has won no matter what the outcome.

Some compromises do leave everyone satisfied. You and the seller of a used car might settle on a price that is between what the seller was asking and what you wanted to pay. Although neither of you got everything you wanted, the outcome would still leave both of you satisfied. Likewise, you and your companion might agree to see a movie that is the second choice for both of you. As long as everyone is at least somewhat satisfied with an outcome, compromise can be an effective way to resolve conflicts. When compromises are satisfying and successful, it might be more accurate to categorize them as the final style we discuss: collaboration.

COLLABORATION (WIN-WIN)

Collaboration seeks win-win solutions to conflict. It involves a high degree of concern for both self and others, with the goal of solving problems not "my way" or "your way" but "our way." In the best case, collaborating can lead to a *win-win* outcome, where each person gets what she or he wants (Bannink, 2010).

In **win-win problem solving**, the goal is to find a solution that satisfies the needs of everyone involved. Not only do the partners avoid trying to succeed at each other's expense, but there's also a belief that working together can provide a solution in which all reach their goals without needing to compromise.

Collaborating has benefits beyond the problem at hand. When people want to achieve a win-win resolution to an argument, they're

more likely to actively listen to their partners. That approach leads to less aggressive communication and ultimately less stress for everyone (Liu & Roloff, 2015).

A few examples show how collaboration can lead to win-win outcomes:

- A boss and her employees get into a conflict over scheduling. The employees often want to shift their scheduled work hours to accommodate personal needs, whereas the boss needs to ensure full staffing at all times. After some discussion they arrive at a solution that satisfies everyone: Employees are free to trade hours among themselves, as long as the store remains fully staffed.
- A conflict about testing arises in a college class. Due to sickness and other reasons, some students need to take a make-up exam. The instructor doesn't want to give these students any advantage over their peers or create a new exam. After working on the problem together, the instructor and students arrive at a win-win solution. The instructor will hand out a list of 20 possible exam questions in advance. At examination time, 5 of these questions will be randomly drawn for the class to answer. Students who take a make-up exam will draw from the same pool of questions.
- A newly married couple find themselves arguing frequently over their budget. One partner enjoys buying impractical items, while the other fears that such purchases will ruin their carefully constructed budget. Their solution is to set aside a small amount of money each month for "fun" purchases. The amount is small enough to be affordable while allowing for occasional splurges. The more conservative spouse is satisfied with the arrangement because the fun money is now a budget category.

Although such solutions might seem obvious when you read them here, a moment's reflection will show you that such cooperative problem solving is all too rare. People faced with these types of conflicts often resort to avoiding, accommodating, or competing, and they wind up handling the issues in a manner that results in either a win-lose or lose-lose outcome. As we pointed out earlier, it's a shame to see one or both partners in a conflict come away unsatisfied when they could both get what they're seeking by collaborating. Later in this chapter, you'll learn a specific process for arriving at collaborative solutions to problems.

Of course, a win-win approach is not always possible or even always appropriate. Collaborative problem solving can be quite time consuming, and some conflict decisions need to be made quickly. Moreover, many conflicts are about relatively minor issues that don't call for a great deal of creativity and brainstorming. As you'll see in the following section, there certainly will be times when compromising is the most sensible approach. You will even encounter instances when pushing for your own solution is reasonable. Even more surprisingly, you will probably discover there are times when it makes sense to willingly accept the loser's role. Much of the time, however, good intentions and creative thinking can lead to outcomes that satisfy everyone's needs.

WHICH STYLE TO USE?

Although collaborative problem solving might seem like the most attractive style, it's an oversimplification to imagine that there is a single best way to respond to conflicts (Gross & Guerrero, 2000). Generally speaking, win-win approaches are preferable to win-lose and lose-lose solutions. But we've already seen that there are times when avoidance, accommodation, competition, and compromise are appropriate. Table 11.1 suggests situations when it may be best to use a particular style.

A conflict style isn't necessarily a personality trait that carries across all situations. Wilmot and Hocker (2014) suggest that roughly 50 percent of the population change their style from one situation to another. As you learned in Chapter 1, this sort of behavioral flexibility is a characteristic of competent communicators. Several factors govern which style to use, including the situation, the other person, and your goals.

TABLE 11.1 When to Use Each Conflict Style

Factor	Avoidance (Lose-Lose)	Accommodation (Lose-Win)	Competition (Win-Lose)	Compromise	Collaboration (Win-Win)
The issue's importance	When the issue is of little importance	When the issue is more important to the other person than to you	When the issue is not important enough to negotiate at length	When the issue is moderately important but not enough for a stalemate	When the issue is too important for a compromise
Point of view	To cool down and gain perspective	When you discover you are wrong	When you are convinced that your position is right and necessary	When both sides are strongly committed to mutually exclusive goals	When you can merge insights with someone who has a different perspective on the problem
Time	When the issue isn't worth a lot of time and effort	When the long-term cost of winning may not be worth the short-term gain	When there is not enough time to seek a win-win outcome	To achieve quick, temporary solutions to complex problems	When you are willing to invest the necessary time and energy
Relational considerations	When the costs of confrontation outweigh the benefits	To build up credits for later conflicts	When the other person is not willing to seek a win-win outcome	When you jeopardize nothing important on either side	When the long-term relationship is important
Rationale	To stay away from either unnecessary risk and/or unnecessary involvement	When the issue isn't important or the costs of challenging the other are too high	To protect yourself against an unacceptable threat	As a backup mode when collaboration doesn't work	To come up with creative solutions

Adapted from Wilmot, W. W., & Hocker, J. L. (2014). *Interpersonal conflict* (9th ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.

ASSESSING YOUR COMMUNICATION

Your Method of Conflict Resolution

Think of a close relationship with someone you see regularly (e.g., a parent, sibling, roommate, close friend, spouse, or partner). How do you usually respond to conflicts with this person? Indicate the degree to which you believe each of the following statements applies to you during these conflicts, using a scale ranging from 1 to 5, where 1 = "never" and 5 = "very often."

_____ **1.** I am usually firm in pursuing my goals.

_____ **2.** I attempt to deal with all of the other person's and my own concerns.

_____ **3.** I try to find a compromise solution.

_____ **4.** I try to avoid creating unpleasantness for myself.

_____ **5.** It's important to me that others are happy, even if it comes at my expense.

_____ **6.** I try to win my position.

_____ **7.** I consistently seek the other's help in working out a solution.

_____ **8.** I give up some points in exchange for others.

_____ **9.** I try to postpone dealing with the issue.

_____ **10.** I might try to soothe the other's feelings and preserve our relationship.

_____ **11.** I persistently try to get my points made.

_____ **12.** I try to integrate my concerns with the other person's.

_____ **13.** I will let the other person have some of what she or he wants if she or he lets me have some of what I want.

_____ **14.** I sometimes avoid taking positions that would create controversy.

_____ **15.** I sometimes sacrifice my own wishes for those of the other person.

_____ **16.** I try to show the other person the logic and benefits of my position.

_____ **17.** I tell the other person my ideas and ask for his or hers.

_____ **18.** I propose a middle ground.

_____ **19.** I try to do what is necessary to avoid tensions.

_____ **20.** I don't worry about my own concerns if satisfying them means damaging the relationship.

Adapted from the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument: Thomas, K. W., & Kilmann, R. H. (2007). *Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument.* Mountain View, CA: Xicom, a subsidiary of CPP, Inc. (Original work published 1974). Also see Thomas, K. W., & Kilmann, R. (1978). Comparison of four instruments measuring conflict behavior. *Psychological Report, 42,* 1139–1145.

For scoring information, see page 351 at the end of the chapter.

The Situation

When someone clearly has more power than you, accommodation may be the best approach. If the boss tells you to "fill that order *now!*" you probably ought to do it without comment. A more competitive response ("Why don't you ask Karen to do it? She has less work than I do") might state your true feelings, but it could also cost you your job. Beyond power, other situational factors can shape your communication in a conflict. For example, you would probably try to set aside personal disagreements with siblings or parents when it's necessary to support one another during a family crisis.

The Other Person

Although win-win is a fine ideal, sometimes the other person isn't interested in (or good at) collaborating. You probably know communicators who are so competitive that even for minor issues, they put winning ahead of the well-being of your relationship. In such cases, your efforts to collaborate may have a low chance of success.

Your Goals

When you want to solve a problem, it's generally good to be assertive (see Chapter 5 for information on creating assertive "I" messages). But there are other reasons for communicating in a conflict. Sometimes your overriding concern is to calm down an enraged or upset communicator. For example, company policy or self-preservation might lead you to keep quiet in the face of a customer's rant or a boss's unfair criticism. Likewise, you might choose to sit quietly through the nagging of a family member at Thanksgiving dinner rather than make a scene. In other cases, your moral principles might compel an aggressive statement, even though it might not get you what you originally sought: "I've had enough of your racist jokes. I've tried to explain why they're so offensive, but I don't think you have listened. I'm leaving!"

CONFLICT IN RELATIONAL SYSTEMS

Even though the style you choose in a conflict is important, your approach isn't the only factor that will determine how the situation unfolds. In reality, conflict happens within *relational systems*; its character is usually determined by the way the people involved interact (Williams-Baucom et al., 2010). For example, you might expect to handle a conflict with your neighbors collaboratively, only to be driven to competition by their uncooperative nature or even to avoidance by their physical threats. Likewise, you might plan to avoid talking with a professor about your discomfort with the class format but wind up collaboratively discussing the matter in response to her constructive suggestion. Examples like these demonstrate that conflict isn't just a matter of individual choice. Rather, it depends on relational interactions.

COMPLEMENTARY AND SYMMETRICAL CONFLICT

The conflict approaches of partners in interpersonal relationships—and impersonal ones, too—can be complementary or symmetrical. In **complementary conflict**, the partners use different but mutually reinforcing

behaviors. As Table 11.2 illustrates, some complementary conflicts are destructive, whereas others are constructive. In **symmetrical conflict**, both people use the same tactics. Table 11.2 shows how the same conflict can unfold in very different ways, depending on whether the partners' communication is symmetrical or complementary.

A complementary "fight–flight" approach is common in many unhappy marriages. One partner addresses the conflict directly, whereas the other withdraws (Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2006). As Chapter 4 explained, this pattern can lead to a cycle of increasing hostility and isolation because each partner punctuates the conflict differently, blaming the other for making matters worse. "I withdraw because you're so critical," one partner might say. However, the other wouldn't sequence it the same way: "I criticize because you withdraw." Couples who use demand–withdraw patterns report being less than satisfied with their conflict discussions and that their negotiations rarely produce change (McGinn et al., 2009).

The same fight–flight pattern also shows up in conflicts between parents and teenagers, most commonly when they tangle over issues like chores, cleanliness, and curfews. Families who fall into a demand–withdraw pattern are likely to feel stressed and unhappy about their relationships. They even have a greater likelihood of falling ill than families who handle disagreements more constructively (Reznik et al., 2015).

Complementary approaches aren't the only ones that can lead to problems. Some distressed relationships suffer from destructively symmetrical communication (Weingart et al., 2015). If both partners treat each other with matching hostility, one threat and insult leads to another in an **escalatory spiral**. If the partners both withdraw from each other instead of facing their problems, a problematic **de-escalatory spiral** results: the hostility decreases, but the satisfaction and vitality ebb from the relationship.

TABLE 11.2 Complementary and Symmetrical Conflict Outcomes

Situation	Complementary Conflict	Symmetrical Conflict
One partner is upset because the other is spending little time at home.	**Destructive:** One partner makes demands; the other withdraws, spending even less time at home.	**Constructive:** One partner raises concern clearly and assertively, without aggression. The other responds by explaining concerns in the same manner.
Boss makes fun of employee in front of other workers.	**Constructive:** Employee seeks out boss for private conversation, explaining why the joking was embarrassing. Boss listens willingly.	**Destructive:** Employee maliciously jokes about boss at company party. Boss continues to make fun of employee.
Parents are uncomfortable about teenager's new friends.	**Destructive:** Parents express concerns. Teen dismisses them, saying "There's nothing to worry about."	**Constructive:** Teen expresses concern that parents are being too protective. Parents and teen negotiate a mutually agreeable solution.

As portrayed in the Broadway musical *Hamilton*, the long-running feud between Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton turned into a lethal escalatory spiral. ***What tactics can you use to keep an interpersonal conflict from raging out of control?***

As Table 11.2 shows, however, both complementary and symmetrical behaviors can also be constructive. If the complementary behaviors are positive, then a positive spiral results, and the conflict stands a good chance of being resolved. This is the case in the second example in Table 11.2, when the boss is open to hearing the employee's concerns. Here, a complementary talk–listen pattern works well.

Constructive symmetry occurs when both people communicate assertively, listening to one another's concerns and working together to resolve them. Married couples who take this approach appraise their marriages more positively than any other type of couple does (Hanzal & Segrin, 2009; Ridley et al., 2001). The parent–teenager conflict in Table 11.2 has the potential for this sort of solution. With enough mutual respect and careful listening, both the parents and their teenager can understand one another's concerns and possibly find a way to give all three people what they want.

SERIAL ARGUMENTS

In a perfect world, we could work through each relational conflict and move on, satisfied that the matter was resolved. But in real life, some issues keep recurring. Like weeds in a garden, they become a perennial problem that requires constant attention.

Serial arguments are repetitive conflicts about the same issue (Morrison & Schrodt, 2017). They can focus on topics ranging from the seemingly mundane (e.g., managing household chores) to the extremely serious (e.g., substance abuse, infidelity).

One study looked at causes of serial arguments in romantic relationships (Bevan et al., 2014). One of the most common involves *problematic behaviors*—habits such as chronic overspending (or tight budgeting) and sloppiness (or hyper-neatness).

Another source of ongoing friction is *personality characteristics*, such as introversion and extroversion. If you're an extrovert who craves social interaction, and your partner is an introvert who cherishes solitude (or vice versa), challenges are likely. Some serial arguments stem from only one partner's personality: a perpetual pessimist or a constant critic, for example. Changing deeply ingrained ways of thinking and acting isn't impossible, but it's difficult.

Another common issue in serial arguments involves *communication styles and practices*, or the typical ways in which partners communicate. For example, if you typically avoid confrontation while your partner is routinely assertive, that's likely to cause continual friction. Likewise, chronic disputes will probably occur if you prefer candor while your partner is more diplomatic.

Regardless of the topic, unresolved serial arguments can be emotionally loaded. Frustration with recurring problems can lead to the kinds of rumination described in Chapter 8, adding fuel to the emotional fire and making future arguments more intense (Bevan et al., 2017). It's not surprising then that serial arguments are more likely than nonrecurring ones to use hostile communication. Angry exclamations such as "We've been down this road a dozen times!" or "I can't believe we're fighting about this again!" are typical of serial arguing and express a sense of despair.

Despite this discouraging picture, the results can be positive when both partners are equally involved and willing to talk about the chronic issue (Johnson & Cionea, 2017). Positive expectations also can help: Partners who seek a win-win outcome are more likely to listen to each other and less likely to be hostile, ultimately leading to less stress and anger (Liu & Roloff, 2015). The problem-solving method described at the end of this chapter might not make serial arguments go away, but it can offer steps in the right direction. And third-party intervention may help both parties see the recurring problem in a new and helpful light (see the sidebar on p. 346).

TOXIC CONFLICT: THE "FOUR HORSEMEN"

Some conflict approaches are so destructive that they are almost guaranteed to wreak havoc on relationships. These toxic forms of communication include what John Gottman has called the "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" (Gottman, 1994; see also Fowler & Dillow, 2011; Horan et al., 2015).

Gottman has gathered decades of data about newlywed couples and their communication patterns. By observing their interactions, he has been able to predict with high accuracy whether the newlyweds will end up divorcing. Here are the four destructive signs he looks for:

1. **Criticism**: These are attacks on a person's character. As you read in Chapter 5, there's a significant difference between legitimate complaints phrased in descriptive "I" language ("I wish you had been on time—we're going to be late to the movie") and critical character assaults stated as evaluative "you" messages ("You're so thoughtless—you never think of anyone but yourself").
2. **Defensiveness**: As you'll read in Chapter 12, defensiveness is a reaction that aims to protect one's presenting self by denying responsibility ("You're crazy—I never do that") and counterattacking ("You're worse about that than I am"). Although some self-protection is understandable, problems arise when a person refuses to listen to or even acknowledge another's concerns.

In "Love Yourself," Justin Bieber sings about two of Gottman's four horsemen. The lyric "I never like to admit I was wrong" reveals defensiveness, and "My mama don't like you, and she likes everyone" reflects contempt. ***How would you react if you were on the receiving end of comments like these?***

3. **Contempt**: A contemptuous comment belittles and demeans. It can take the form of name-calling putdowns ("You're a real jerk") or sarcastic barbs ("Oh, *that* was brilliant"). Contempt can also be communicated nonverbally through dramatic eye rolls or disgusted sighs. (Try doing both of those at the same time and imagine how dismissing they can be.)
4. **Stonewalling**: Stonewalling occurs when one person in a relationship withdraws from the interaction, shutting down dialogue—and any chance of resolving the problem in a mutually satisfactory way. It sends a disconfirming "you don't matter" message to the other person.

Here's a brief exchange illustrating how the "four horsemen" can lead to a destructive spiral of aggression:

"You overdrew our account again—can't you do *anything* right?" (Criticism)
"Hey, don't blame me—you're the one who spends most of the money." (Defensiveness)
"At least I have better math skills than a first-grader. Way to go, Einstein." (Contempt)
"Whatever" (said while walking out of the room). (Stonewalling)

Engaging in this kind of communication not only jeopardizes relationships but also takes a physical toll (Haase et al., 2016). Critical, contemptuous communicators have an increased risk of cardiovascular problems such as high blood pressure and chest pain. Stonewallers tend to experience backaches and stiff muscles. In other words, it's not healthy to either "blow up" or "bottle up." Instead, communicators in conflict need to express their emotions in healthy, productive ways, as outlined in this chapter and the next.

Toxic conflict can be destructive in any interpersonal relationship. Criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling feed off one another and can develop into destructive conflict rituals, as we see next.

CONFLICT RITUALS

When people have been in a relationship for some time, their communication often develops into **conflict rituals**—unacknowledged but very real repeating patterns of interlocking behavior (Wilmot & Hocker, 2014). Consider a few common rituals:

- A young child interrupts her parents, demanding to be included in their conversation. At first the parents tell the child to wait, but she whines and cries until the parents find it easier to listen than to ignore the fussing. This pattern reoccurs whenever the child has a demand the parents hesitate to fulfill.
- A couple fights. One partner leaves. The other accepts blame for the problem and begs forgiveness. The first partner returns, and a happy reunion takes place. Soon they fight again, and the pattern repeats.

- One friend is unhappy with the other. The unhappy person withdraws until the other asks what's wrong. "Nothing," the first replies. The questioning persists until the problem is finally out in the open. The friends then solve the issue and continue happily until the next problem arises, when the pattern repeats itself.

There's nothing inherently wrong with the interaction in many rituals (Olson, 2002). Consider the preceding examples. In the first, the child's whining may be the only way she can get the parents' attention. In the second, both partners might use the fighting as a way to blow off steam, and both might find that the joy of a reunion is worth the grief of the separation. The third ritual might work well when one friend is more assertive than the other.

Rituals can cause problems, though, when they become the *only* way relational partners handle their conflicts. As you learned in Chapter 1, competent communicators have a large repertoire of behaviors, and they are able to choose the most effective response for a given situation. Relying on one pattern to handle all conflicts is no more effective than using a screwdriver to handle every home repair or putting the same seasoning in every dish you cook; what works in one situation isn't likely to succeed in most others. Conflict rituals may be familiar and comfortable, but they aren't the best way to solve the variety of problems that come up in any relationship.

VARIABLES IN CONFLICT STYLES

By now you can see that every relational system is unique. The communication patterns in one family, business, or classroom are likely to be very different from those in any other. But along with the differences that arise in individual relationships, two powerful variables affect the way people manage conflict: gender and culture.

GENDER

Some research suggests that men and women often approach conflicts differently (e.g., Archer, 2002; Gayle et al., 2002). These differences may emerge in adolescence. Whereas teenage boys often engage in verbal showdowns or even physical fights, teenage girls typically use gossip, backbiting, and social exclusion (Hess & Hagen, 2006; Underwood, 2003). This is not to suggest that girls' aggression is any less destructive than boys'. The movie and musical *Mean Girls* (based on Rosalind Wiseman's book *Queen Bees and Wannabes*, 2003) offers a vivid depiction of just how injurious these indirect assaults can be on the self-concepts and relationships of young women. Research suggests that these forms of female aggression continue into college and can occur online as well as in person (Miller-Ott & Kelly, 2013).

A survey of college students reinforced stereotypes about the influence of gender in conflicts (Collier, 1991). Regardless of their cultural

FOCUS ON RESEARCH

"We Have to Talk": Men and Women in Conflict

Imagine you're in a heterosexual dating relationship and get into a quarrel with your partner. One of you wants to drop the subject and move on. The other says, "No, we need to talk this out." Venture a guess: Who is likely the male in this episode, and who is the female?

Tamara Afifi and her colleagues asked 100 dating couples to hold a private conversation about a conflict issue in their relationship. Afterward, the researchers surveyed each partner about his or her relational communication and satisfaction, then did so again a week later.

If you thought the "talk it out" person in the scenario was likely female, you're right. Most women in the study wanted and expected open conversations about conflict. If they sensed their partners were being avoidant, they weren't happy. If they brooded about it for a week, their relational dissatisfaction grew. On the other hand, most men had different expectations for openness during conflict. They also weren't bothered if they thought either partner was avoiding conflict.

These results reflect cultural "standards for openness," according to the researchers. It appears that American women often expect to talk things out during conflicts in ways that men do not. Men may avoid conflict to stay out of harm's way—but in doing so, they might create greater relational problems with the women they date.

Afifi, T. D., Joseph, A., & Aldeis, D. (2012). The "standards for openness hypothesis": Why women find (conflict) avoidance more dissatisfying than men. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 29,* 102–125.

background, female students described men as being concerned with power and more interested in content than in relational issues. Sentences used to describe male conflict styles included, "The most important thing to males in conflict is their egos"; "Men don't worry about feelings"; and "Men are more direct." In contrast, women were described as being more concerned with maintaining the relationship during a conflict. Sentences used to describe female conflict styles included, "Women are better listeners"; "Women try to solve problems without controlling the other person"; and "Females are more concerned with others' feelings."

In contrast with this extreme view, another body of research suggests that gender differences in handling conflict are rather small (Samter & Cupach, 1998; Woodin, 2011). As Woodin (2011) concluded, "men and women may be more similar than different in resolving conflict" (p. 332). People may *think* that there are greater differences in male

and female ways of handling conflicts than actually exist (Allen, 1998). People who assume that men are aggressive and women accommodating may notice behavior that fits these stereotypes ("See how much he bosses her around? A typical man!"). On the other hand, behavior that doesn't fit these preconceived ideas (accommodating men, pushy women) goes unnoticed.

The research described so far focuses on how gender affects the way *individuals* deal with conflict. Given the transactional nature of communication, it's just as important to explore how gender affects behavior when people in close relationships disagree.

After studying heterosexual marriages for years, John Gottman (of "Four Horsemen" fame) wanted to know if gay and lesbian couples have the same conflict patterns as heterosexual partners. An extensive study (Gottman et al., 2003) revealed that same-sex couples approach conflicts far less negatively than male–female partners. This lack of hostility creates positive communication spirals, in which same-sex partners are able to hear each other's complaints less defensively. Why do same-sex couples manage conflicts more constructively? Gottman speculates that their relationships don't have as many of the power struggles that come from traditional male and female sex roles. When it comes to conflict management, he believes that "heterosexual relationships may have a great deal to learn from homosexual relationships" (p. 87).

Managing household labor illustrates one way same-sex partners may handle conflicts better than heterosexual partners. Handling chores is no small matter; communication researchers have found that arguments about daily tasks are among the most frequent and destructive sources of relational conflict (Alberts et al., 2011). Housekeeping arguments can be especially strong in heterosexual relationships, where gender norms about domestic responsibilities come into play. Research suggests that same-sex parents divvy up child-care responsibilities more evenly, and also participate more equally than heterosexual parents in family interactions (Farr & Patterson, 2013).

Sporting events often reflect cultural values and attitudes in ways that might not immediately be apparent. ***By looking at competitive forms of entertainment, what can you learn about the assumptions that govern conflict in your home culture?***

CULTURE

People from most cultures prefer mutually beneficial resolutions to disagreements whenever possible (Cai & Fink, 2002). Nonetheless, the ways in which people communicate during conflicts vary from one culture to another (Croucher et al., 2012). Cultures differ in their orientation toward disagreement (is it to be avoided or is it acceptable?), rapport management (how important is it to ensure relationship maintenance?),

and the preserving of face (is it vital to preserve dignity for self and the other party?).

Ways of managing conflict that are unremarkable in one culture may look odd to outsiders. As you read in Chapter 2, the direct communication style that characterizes many low-context North American and Western European cultures is not the norm in other parts of the world. Assertiveness that might seem perfectly appropriate to a native of the United States or Canada would be rude and insensitive in many high-context Asian countries (Ma & Jaeger, 2010). Members of individualistic cultures often prefer competing as a conflict style, whereas members of collectivistic cultures prefer the styles of compromising and problem solving (Lim, 2009).

East Asian cultures tend to avoid confrontation, placing a premium on preserving and honoring the face of the other person. The Japanese notion of self-restraint is reflected in the important concept of *wa*, or harmony. This aversion to conflict is even manifested in the Japanese legal system. Estimates are that the Japanese have only one lawyer for every 4,000 people, whereas in the United States, a culture that values assertive behavior, there is one lawyer for every 275 people.

The same attitude toward conflict aversion has traditionally prevailed in China (which has approximately one lawyer for every 6,500 people), where one proverb states, "The first person to raise his voice loses the argument." Among Chinese college students (in both the People's Republic and Taiwan), the three most common methods of persuasion are "hinting," "setting an example by one's own actions," and "strategically agreeing to whatever pleases others" (Ma & Chuang, 2001)—even if the consequences are negative (Zhang et al., 2011). However, these approaches appear to be changing. Young adults in China favor collaborative problem solving more than do their elders (Zhang et al., 2005), and they acknowledge that conflicts can have value for achieving one's own goals and improving relationships (Xie et al., 2015).

Within American culture, race/ethnicity plays a modest but important role in shaping what people think about conflict. One study showed that when Americans described their views on conflict, there were few differences by race/ethnicity (Cionea et al., 2015). However, Caucasians were more likely than Asian Americans and African Americans to say that conflict could have a positive effect on relationships. Asian Americans tended to be more withdrawn in conflict, while Hispanic and Latino Americans were more assertive. But again, these differences were relatively small and were dependent on how strongly the respondents identified with their race or ethnicity.

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN PRACTICE

The collaborative conflict management style described earlier in this chapter is a skill to be learned, and it pays off. An 11-year study following 100 couples who had conflict skills training found that *it works* for couples

willing to focus on improving their relationships (Hahlweg & Richter, 2010).

Win-win problem solving can be enacted through a seven-step approach (adapted from Weider-Hatfield, 1981 and Raider et al., 2006). Notice how many of the skills that have been discussed throughout this book are incorporated in this process:

1. **Define your needs.** Begin by deciding what you want or need. Sometimes the answer is obvious, as in our earlier example of the neighbor whose loud music kept others awake. In other instances, however, the apparent problem masks a more fundamental one.

   Because your needs won't always be clear, it's often necessary to think about a problem alone, before approaching the other person involved. Talking to a third person can sometimes help you sort out your thoughts. In either case, you should explore both the apparent content of your dissatisfaction and the relational issues that may lurk behind it.
2. **Share your needs with the other person.** Once you've defined your needs, it's time to share them with your partner. Two guidelines are important here. First, be sure to choose a time and place that is suitable. Unloading on a tired or busy partner lowers the odds that your concerns will be well received. Likewise, be sure you are at your best; don't bring an issue up when your anger may cause you to say things you'll later regret, when your discouragement blows the problem out of proportion, or when you're distracted by other business. Making a date to discuss the problem—such as after dinner or over a cup of coffee—often can boost the odds of a successful outcome.

   The second guideline for sharing a problem is to use the descriptive "I" language outlined in Chapter 5. In a tense situation,

Media Clip

Hostile Takeover: *The Founder*

It started as a collaboration. The McDonald brothers (played by Nick Offerman and John Carroll Lynch) had a successful fast-food restaurant in California. Ray Kroc (Michael Keaton) had the vision and know-how to franchise the concept across the country. It seemed like a win-win partnership.

Even though McDonald's became an iconic brand, *The Founder* isn't a feel-good story. Based on actual events, the film chronicles how Kroc turned competitive, intent on taking all the gold from the arches. He's not an ethical communicator. Kroc leaves the McDonald brothers out of business decisions, hangs up on their phone calls, and fails to keep his word. Ultimately he buys them out of their business and its name—which of course is *their* name.

To be fair, McDonald's wouldn't have become a world-famous chain without Kroc, and the brothers were compensated in the buyout. But Kroc broke more than just promises. In pursuit of material success, he destroyed a partnership. The story reminds us that when relationships matter, winning at the expense of others can have its own costs.

however, it may not be easy to start sharing your needs. Raider et al. (2006) recommend beginning with what they call *ritual sharing*, which is preliminary, casual conversation. The goal is to build rapport, establish common ground, and perhaps pick up information.

3. **Listen to the other person's needs.** Once your own wants and needs are clear, it's time to find out what the other person wants and needs. This phase requires active listening skills (as described in Chapter 7) and empathy (Jandt, 2017). Now is a good time to engage in paraphrasing, both to make sure the other person has been heard and to draw out additional information.

   Recognize that this stage might take some time. Before moving to generating solutions, both people need to believe they have been heard and that all the content and relational issues of their conflict are on the table. This might include exploring how previous issues (or even previous relationships) are affecting how they're communicating with each other about this particular conflict.

@work Third-Party Dispute Resolution

In a perfect world, people involved in disagreements would solve every problem themselves. But in real life, even the best intentions don't always lead to a satisfying conclusion. At times like these, a neutral third party can help—especially in workplace conflicts.

Consider the many types of business disputes where this is true: clashes between partners, contract disagreements, conflicts among team members, employee grievances, and consumer complaints, to name a few. As these examples show, some conflicts occur between members of the same organization, whereas others involve an organization at odds with an outsider.

Third-party interventions can range from informal to legalistic. At the simple end of the spectrum, you and a colleague might ask a trusted coworker to help you resolve a disagreement. In other cases, it may be useful to involve a trained mediator or facilitator who can help sort out issues and suggest

solutions. In the most serious cases, parties may submit their grievances to an arbitrator or judge who will impose a decision. Whichever approach is used, it's important that a third party be neutral and unbiased to ensure a fair and effective outcome (Gent & Shannon, 2011). Whatever the form, third-party intervention can help bring closure to a dispute that would otherwise fester or escalate.

4. **Generate possible solutions.** In the next step, you and your partner try to think of ways to satisfy both your needs. You can best do so by "brainstorming"—inventing as many potential solutions as you can. The key to success in brainstorming is to seek quantity without worrying about quality. Prohibit criticism of any idea, no matter how outlandish it may sound. An idea that seems farfetched can sometimes lead to a more workable one. Another rule of brainstorming is that ideas aren't personal property. If one person makes a suggestion, the other should feel free to suggest another solution that builds on or modifies the original one. The original suggestion and its offshoots are all potential solutions that will be considered later. Once partners get over their possessiveness about ideas, the level of defensiveness drops, and both people can work together to find the best solution without worrying about whose idea it is.
5. **Evaluate the possible solutions, and choose the best one.** The time to evaluate the solutions is after they all have been generated, after you feel you have exhausted all the possibilities. In this step, the possible solutions are reviewed for their ability to satisfy everyone's important goals. How does each solution stand up against the individual and mutual goals? Which solution satisfies the most goals? Partners need to work cooperatively in examining each solution and in finally selecting the best one—or perhaps some combination of ideas.
6. **Implement the solution.** Now the time comes to try out the idea selected to see if it does, indeed, satisfy everyone's needs. Sometimes solutions that seem good in theory don't work well in practice. That's why it's important to engage in the final step of the conflict management process—the follow-up.
7. **Follow up on the solution.** To stop the process after selecting and implementing a particular solution assumes any solution is forever, that people remain constant, and that events never alter circumstances. Of course, this is not the case: As people and circumstances change, a particular solution may lose or increase its effectiveness. Regardless, a follow-up evaluation needs to take place.

   After you've tested your solution for a short time, it's a good idea to plan a meeting to talk about how things are going. You may find that you need to make some changes or even rethink the whole problem. In addition, people can walk away from conflict sessions believing they agree on a resolution, when in fact they don't (Roloff et al., 2015). Following up can help ensure that partners are on the same page.

   Table 11.3 walks through each stage of this process. What works for the couple in this scenario might not work for others, but that's what makes communication unique to each relationship. The key is to be satisfied with your solution.

TABLE 11.3 Walkthrough of the Conflict Management Process

Scenario: Brook and Anant have been seeing each other for several months and are now in an exclusive relationship. Brook calls or texts Anant frequently when they're apart. Anant rarely initiates contact with Brook and usually doesn't respond to messages. Each is annoyed with the other's behavior.

Step	Example
1. Define your needs.	At first, Anant thinks the annoyance is only due to being interrupted while trying to focus on school and work. More self-examination shows that the irritation centers on the relational message Brook's calls seem to imply. Anant views the constant contact as a form of being monitored and perhaps as a sign that Brook doesn't trust what Anant is doing when they aren't together.
2. Share your needs with the other person.	After some preliminary, casual conversation (ritual sharing), Anant could offer this observation: "Brook, our relationship is very important to me, and I'm glad you want to keep in touch. I'm a bit concerned, however, about how often you call or text me. When I'm at school or work, or if I'm hanging out with my friends, I want to be able to focus on those activities. At times like that, your messages can seem like a distraction rather than a sign of affection. And I'll admit that I wonder *why* you're calling so often. Is there some sort of trust issue we need to discuss?"
3. Listen to the other person's needs.	It's possible that Brook will have a defensive reaction to Anant's observation ("I can't believe you see my calls and texts as a *distraction*!"), but ideally the needs and concerns that drive the conversation will become clear. Brook: "When I call and text you, it's my way of communicating that I'm thinking about you. When you don't respond, it hurts. I take it as a sign that you don't care about me as much as I care about you." Anant: "So you're saying that texts and calls are just a sign of care and concern, and they're not an attempt to monitor me?" This might allow Brook to explore the motives for messaging Anant. Brook might paraphrase Anant this way: "It sounds like you don't want to have contact with me when we're away from each other, and that you view my messages as an intrusion into your personal space." Anant can then clarify which parts of that interpretation are or are not accurate.
4. Generate possible solutions.	Anant and Brook use brainstorming to generate solutions for their problem. The list includes eliminating, limiting, continuing, or increasing the number of calls Brook makes to Anant. Likewise, Anant could reduce or increase responses to Brook. The couple could decide that text messages are preferable to voice messages, or that one type of contact (call or text) needs to be answered and the other doesn't. Day calls might be okay but not evening calls, or vice versa. Perhaps Anant could initiate calls; maybe Brook could contact other friends instead when wanting to chat. They might also discuss larger issues about how much time they spend together in person or with their friends. It could even be an opportunity to discuss whether they want to slow down or speed up their relationship. Although some of these solutions are clearly unacceptable to both partners, they list all the ideas they can think of, preparing themselves for the next step in win-win problem solving.
5. Evaluate the possible solutions, and choose the best one.	Brook and Anant decide to limit texts and calls to two or three per day, and that Anant will initiate at least one of them. They also agree to briefly respond to the other's text messages when they're at social events, but not during school or work hours. Anant believes that fewer calls will communicate that Brook values autonomy and trusts their relationship. Brook thinks that messages Anant initiates or responds to will indicate that both are equally invested in the relationship.

6. Implement the solution.	Anant and Brook follow their new guidelines and, for the most part, are satisfied—but there are still some issues. If Brook contacts Anant simply to say, "I'll be home in 30 minutes," does that count? Likewise, if Anant initiates a message, but it's just about making arrangements, does that satisfy Brook?
7. Follow up on the solution.	Brook and Anant schedule a date to talk about their solution two weeks later. Over dinner, they both report feeling good about the new arrangements and realize that trust was indeed an issue for Brook. They agree to differentiate between personal calls (which they will limit) and necessary calls to make arrangements as needed (which will have no constraints). Anant admits that initiating calls is challenging and decides to turn off the phone during school and work hours. Brook asks Anant to send a quick text when open for contact. Anant sees that as a good way to remember to send a check-in message each day.

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Objective 11.1 Describe the nature of conflict and its attributes.

Despite wishes and cultural myths to the contrary, conflict is a natural and unavoidable part of any relationship. Because conflict can't be escaped, the challenge is how to deal with it effectively so that it strengthens a relationship rather than weakens it. All conflicts possess the same characteristics: expressed struggle, perceived incompatible goals, perceived scarce resources, interdependence, and inevitability.

Q: Describe how the recurring conflicts in one of your important relationships embody the characteristics described in this section.

Objective 11.2 Explain five styles of handling conflict and how they are communicated.

Communicators can respond to conflicts in a variety of ways: avoidance, accommodation, competition, compromise, or collaboration. Each of these approaches can be justified in certain circumstances.

Q: Which of the five styles reflects your typical approach to conflicts? Which styles best describe those with whom you communicate? How satisfying are the results of using these styles? Would other styles be more effective?

Objective 11.3 Recognize various communication patterns in relational conflicts.

The way a conflict is handled isn't always the choice of a single person because the communicators influence one another. In some relationships, partners engage in complementary conflict, whereas in others, the approach is more symmetrical. Repetitive conflicts about the same issue are known as serial arguments. Some forms of communication during conflict are inherently toxic (the "Four Horsemen"): criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling. In ongoing relationships, partners often develop conflict rituals—repeated patterns of interlocking behavior.