

This reading comes from the first chapter of a conflict management textbook written by three speech communication teachers. It lays out some of the basic ideas that I think it's important to understand if you're going to approach conflict constructively and effectively.

The authors begin with a "textbook case" that illustrates both the bad side and the potentially good side of conflict. Although they don't emphasize this point, the case shows how your view of conflict can strongly affect the ways you deal with it. For example, many people view conflict as always painful. From this point of view, unless you enjoy being blamed, put down, and shouted at, it's hard to be positive about conflicts. But if you see conflict as something entirely negative, you'll behave accordingly and will probably help create a self-fulfilling prophecy—the more you believe it's awful, the worse it will get. As the case study shows, there are actually some benefits to conflict. Feelings get out in the open where they can be dealt with, and often people discover creative solutions to problems that had stumped them. So the first step toward handling conflict effectively is to be open to the positive values of conflict so you can, as these authors suggest, analyze "both the specific behaviors and interaction patterns involved in conflict and the forces that influence these patterns."

Folger, Poole, and Stutman define conflict as "the interaction of interdependent people who perceive incompatible goals and interference from each other in achieving those goals." This means that struggles inside one person's head are not "conflict" as it's defined here. Conflict always involves communication. The definition also emphasizes that conflict doesn't happen unless the people involved are interdependent. It only happens when one person's beliefs or actions have some impact on the other's. Otherwise the parties could just ignore each other.

The central section of this chapter distinguishes productive from destructive conflict interaction. One difference is that productive conflicts are *realistic*, which means that they focus on substantive problems the parties can potentially solve, while *nonrealistic* conflicts are mainly expressions of aggression designed to defeat or hurt the other. Productive conflict attitudes and behaviors are also *flexible*, while destructive ones are *inflexible*. In addition, productive conflict management is grounded in the belief that all parties can realize at least some of their goals, while destructive conflict is thoroughly win/lose. Finally, productive conflict happens when the parties are committed to "working through" their differences, rather than either avoiding them or simply favoring one position over the other.

In the final section the authors develop the idea that every move made in a conflict has impact on the other parties, and that this is why conflicts often degenerate into destructive cycles or patterns. These cycles can only be understood as unified wholes, and they can often be self-reinforcing. This means that, if you want to manage conflict effectively, you have to (a) look for the cycles, and (b) be willing and able to take unilateral action to break the destructive pattern. Subsequent readings in this chapter suggest what you can do *after* this to handle conflicts more effectively.

Conflict and Interaction

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The Potential of Conflict Interaction

It is often said that conflict can be beneficial. Trainers, counselors, consultants, and authors of conflict textbooks point to the potential positive functions of conflict: conflicts allow important issues to be aired; they produce new and creative ideas; they release built-up tension; they can strengthen relationships; they can cause groups and organizations to reevaluate and clarify goals and missions; they can also stimulate social change to eliminate inequities and injustice. These advantages, and others, are raised in order to justify conflict as a normal, healthy occurrence and to stress the importance of understanding and handling it properly.

But why must such an argument be made? Everyone has been in conflicts, and almost everyone would readily acknowledge at least some benefits. Why then do social scientists, popular authors, and consultants persist in attempting to persuade us of something we already know? Perhaps the answer can be found by studying an actual conflict. The twists and turns of a specific case often reveal why negative views of conflict persist. Consider the fairly typical case study of a conflict in a small work group in Case I.1.

Case I.1 The Women's Hotline Case

Women's Hotline is a rape and domestic crisis center in a medium-sized city; the center employs seven full- and part-time workers. The workers, all women, formed a cohesive unit and made all important decisions as a group; there were no formal supervisors. The Hotline had started as a voluntary organization and had grown by capturing local and federal funds. The group remained proud of its roots in a democratic, feminist tradition.

The atmosphere at the Hotline was rather informal. The staff saw each other as friends, but there was an implicit understanding that people should not have to take responsibility for each other's cases. Since the Hotline's work was draining, having to handle each other's worries could create an unbearable strain. This norm encouraged workers to work on their own and keep problems to themselves.

The conflict arose when Diane, a new counselor who had only six months' experience, was involved in a very disturbing incident. One of her clients was killed by a man who had previously raped her. Diane had trouble dealing with this incident. She felt guilty about it; she questioned her own ability and asked herself whether she might have been able to prevent this tragedy. In the months following, Diane had increasing

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difficulty in coping with her feelings and began to feel that her co-workers were not giving her the support she needed. Diane had no supervisor to turn to, and, although her friends outside the Hotline were helpful, she did not believe they could understand the pressure as well as her co-workers.

Since the murder, Diane had not been able to work to full capacity, and she began to notice some resentment from the other counselors. She felt the other staff were more concerned about whether she was adding to their work loads than whether she was recovering from the traumatic incident. Although Diane did not realize it at the time, most of the staff felt she had been slow to take on responsibilities even before her client was killed. They thought Diane had generally asked for more help than other staff members and that these requests were adding to their own responsibilities. No one was willing to tell Diane about these feelings after the incident, because they realized she was very disturbed. After six months, Diane believed she could no longer continue to work effectively. She felt pressure from the other women at the center, and she was still shaken by the tragedy. She requested two weeks off with pay in order to get away from the work situation for a while, reduce the stress she felt, and come back with renewed energy. The staff, feeling that Diane was slacking off, denied this request. They responded by outlining, in print, what they saw as the responsibilities of a full-time staff worker. Diane was angry when she realized her request had been denied, and she decided to file a formal work grievance.

Diane and the staff felt bad about having to resort to such a formal, adversarial procedure. No staff member had ever filed a work grievance, and the group was embarrassed by its inability to deal with the problem on a more informal basis. This added to tension between Diane and the staff. The staff committee who received Diane's grievance suggested that they could handle the problem in a less formal way if both Diane and the staff were willing to call in a neutral third party mediator. Everyone agreed that this suggestion had promise, and a third party was invited to a meeting where the entire staff would address the issue.

At this meeting, the group faced a difficult task. Each member offered reactions they had been unwilling to express previously. The staff made several pointed criticisms of Diane's overall performance. Diane expressed doubts about the staff's willingness to help new workers or to give support when it was requested. Although this discussion was often tense, it was well directed. At the outset of the meeting, Diane withdrew her formal complaint. This changed the definition of the problem from the immediate work grievance to the question of what levels of support were required for various people to work effectively in this difficult and emotionally draining setting. Staff members shared doubts and fears about their own inadequacies as counselors and agreed that something less than perfection was acceptable. The group recognized that a collective inertia had developed and that they had consistently avoided giving others the support they needed to deal with difficult rape cases. They acknowledged, however, the constraints on each woman's time; each worker could handle only a limited amount of stress. The group recognized that some level of mutual support was essential and felt they had fallen below that level over the past year and a half. One member suggested that any staff person should be able to ask for a "debriefing contract" whenever they felt they needed help or support. These contracts would allow someone to ask for ten minutes of another person's time to hear about a particularly disturbing issue or case. The group members adopted this suggestion because they saw it could allow members to seek help without overburdening each other. The person who was asked to

listen could assist and give needed support without feeling that she had to "fix" another worker's problem. Diane continued to work at the center and found that her abilities and confidence increased as the group provided the support she needed.

This is a "textbook" case in effective conflict management because it resulted in a solution that all parties accepted. It does, however, exhibit several features in common with even the most destructive conflicts and could easily have turned in a destructive direction. First, the situation was **tense** and **threatening**. The weeks during which the incident evolved were an extremely difficult time for the workers. Even for "old hands" at negotiation, conflicts are often unpleasant and frightening. Second, participants experienced a great deal of **uncertainty**. They were unable to understand many aspects of the conflict and how their behavior affected it. Conflicts are confusing; our actions can have consequences quite different from those we intend because the situation is more complicated than we assume. Diane did **not** know her co-workers thought she was slacking. So when she asked for time off, she was surprised at their refusal, and her own angry reaction nearly started a major battle. Third, the situation was **extremely fragile**. If even one worker had acted differently at several crucial points, the conflict might have gone differently. If, for example, the staff had chosen to fire Diane, the conflict might have been squelched, or it might have festered and undermined relationships among the remaining members. If, on the other hand, Diane had won allies, the staff might have split over the issue and ultimately dissolved the Hotline.

The members of this group were walking a tightrope throughout the conflict. Luckily, they managed to avoid a fall. The tension, unpleasantness, uncertainty, and fragility of conflict situations make them hard to face. Because these problems make it difficult to deal with issues in a constructive way, conflicts are often terminated by force, by uncomfortable suppression of the issues, or by exhaustion after a prolonged fight—all outcomes that leave at least one party dissatisfied. Entering a conflict is often like making a bet against the odds: you can win big if it turns out well, but so many things can go wrong that few people are willing to chance it. It is no wonder then that many writers feel a need to reassure us. They feel compelled to remind us of the positive outcomes of conflict because all too often the destructive results are all that people remember.

We believe that the key to working through conflict is not to minimize its disadvantages, or even to emphasize its positive functions, but to accept both and to try to understand how conflicts move in destructive or productive directions. Such an understanding requires a conception of conflict that calls for a careful analysis of both the specific behaviors and interaction patterns involved in conflict and the forces that influence these patterns. Moreover, we can only grasp the fragility of conflicts and the effects that tension and misunderstandings have in their development if we work at the level at which conflicts unfold—specific interactions among the parties.

Definition of Conflict

Conflict is the interaction of interdependent people who perceive incompatible goals and interference from each other in achieving those goals (Hocker & Wilmot, 1985). This definition has the advantage of providing a much clearer focus

than definitions that view conflict simply as disagreement, as competition, or as the presence of incompatible interests (Fink, 1968). The most important feature of conflict is that it is based on **interaction**. Conflicts are constituted and sustained by the behaviors of the parties involved and their reactions to one another. Conflict interaction takes many forms and each form presents special problems and requires special handling. The most familiar type of conflict interaction is marked by shouting matches or open competition where each party tries to defeat the other. But conflicts can also be more subtle. Often people react to conflict by suppressing it. They interact in ways that allow them to avoid confrontation, either because they are afraid of possible changes the conflict may bring about or because the issue "isn't worth fighting over." This response is as much a part of the conflict process as the open struggles most of us associate with conflict. . . . We believe conflicts can best be understood and managed by concentrating on specific behavioral patterns and the forces shaping them.

People in conflict perceive that they have incompatible goals or interests and that others are a source of interference in achieving their goals. the key word here is "perceive." Regardless of whether goals are actually incompatible or if the parties believe them to be incompatible, conditions are ripe for conflict. Regardless of whether an employee really stands in the way of a co-worker or if the co-worker interprets the employee's behavior as interference, the co-worker may move against her or feel compelled to skirt certain issues. Thus the parties' interpretations and beliefs play a key role in conflicts. This does not mean that goals are always conscious as conflict develops. People can act without a clear sense of what their goals or interests are (Coser, 1961). Sometimes people find themselves in strained interactions but are unsure why. They realize afterward what their implicit goals were and how their goals were incompatible with those held by others (Hawes & Smith, 1973). Communication looms large because of its importance in shaping and maintaining the perceptions that guide conflict behavior.

Indeed, communication problems are sometimes the cause of conflicts. Tension or irritation can result from misunderstandings that occur when people interact with very different communication styles (Tannen, 1986; Grimshaw, 1990). One person's inquisitive style may be seen by someone else as intrusive and rude. One person's attempt to avoid stepping on another's toes may be seen by someone else as distant and cold. Style differences create difficult problems that are often related to differences in cultural backgrounds (Kochman, 1981). We do not, however, agree with the old adage "most conflicts are actually communication problems." The vast majority of conflicts would not exist without some real difference of interest. This difference may be hard to uncover, it may be redefined over time, and occasionally it may be trivial, but it is there nonetheless. Communication processes constitute conflicts and can easily [worsen] them, but they are rarely the sole source of the difficulty.

Conflict interaction is colored by the **interdependence** of the parties. For a conflict to arise, the behavior of one or both parties must have consequences for the other. So, by definition, the parties involved in conflict are interdependent. The conflict at the Hotline would not have occurred if Diane's behavior had not irritated the other workers and if their response had not threatened Diane's position. Furthermore, any action taken in response to the conflict affects both sides. The decision to institute a "debriefing contract" required considerable change by everyone. If Diane had been fired, that too would have affected the other workers; they would have had to "cover" Diane's cases and come to terms with themselves as co-workers who could be accused of being unresponsive or insensitive.

But interdependence implies more than this: when parties are interdependent they can potentially aid or interfere with each other. For this reason, conflicts are always characterized by a mixture of incentives to cooperate and to compete. Any comment during conflict interaction can be seen either as an attempt to advance the speaker's own interest or as an attempt to promote a good outcome for all involved. A party may believe that having their own point accepted is more important, at least for the moment, than proposing a mutually beneficial outcome. When Diane asked for two weeks off, she was probably thinking not of the group's best interest but of her own needs. In other cases, a participant may advance a proposal designed to benefit everyone, as when the staff member suggested the "debriefing contract." In still other instances, a participant may offer a comment with a cooperative intent, but others may interpret it as one that advances individual interests. Regardless of whether the competitive motive is intended by the speaker or assigned by other members, the interaction unfolds from that point under the assumption that the speaker may value only his/her own interests. Subsequent interaction is further likely to undermine incentives to cooperate and is also likely to weaken members' recognition of their own interdependence. The balance of incentives to compete or cooperate is important in determining the direction the conflict interaction takes.

Arenas of Conflict Interaction

Conflict occurs in almost all social settings. Most of us learn at a very young age that conflicts arise in families, playgrounds, classrooms, Little League fields, ballet centers, scout troops, and cheerleading teams. As we enter more complex relationships and become involved in more diverse and public settings, we often find that conflicts remain remarkably similar to those in our early lives. (Indeed, some argue that our early experiences shape our involvement in conflict throughout our lives.) As adults, we find conflict as we enter casual work relationships or emotionally intense, intimate relationships. We find it in close friendships or in political rivalries. We encounter it as we interact in decision-making groups, small businesses, large corporations, church organizations, and doctors' offices. Given the diversity of conflicts we typically encounter, what often is of most concern is how much is at stake in any conflict. We assess whether conflicts are pedestrian or profound, whether their effects on our lives will be trivial or tremendous, whether they are major or minor maelstroms. Our estimate of the significance of any conflict often influences the time and effort we invest in strategizing or in developing safeguards or fallbacks. . . .

Productive and Destructive Conflict Interaction

As we have noted, people often associate conflict with negative outcomes. However, there are times when conflicts must be addressed regardless of the apprehension they create. When differences exist and the issues are important, suppression of conflict is often more dangerous than facing it. The psychologist Irving Janis points to a number of famous political disasters, such as the Bay of Pigs invasion and the failure to anticipate the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, where poor decisions can be traced to the repression of conflict by key decision-making groups (Janis, 1972). The

critical question is: what forms of conflict interaction will yield the obvious benefits without tearing a relationship, a group, or an organization apart?

Years ago the sociologist Lewis Coser (1956) distinguished **realistic** from **nonrealistic** conflicts. **Realistic** conflicts are conflicts based in disagreements over the means to an end or over the ends themselves. In realistic conflicts, the interaction focuses on the substantive issues the participants must address in order to resolve their underlying incompatibilities. **Nonrealistic** conflicts are expressions of aggression in which the sole end is to defeat or hurt the other. Participants in nonrealistic conflicts serve their own interests by undercutting those of the other party. Coser argues that because nonrealistic conflicts are oriented toward the expression of aggression, force and coercion are the means for resolving these disputes. Realistic conflicts, on the other hand, foster a wide range of resolution techniques—force, negotiation, persuasion, even voting—because they are oriented toward the resolution of some substantive problem. Although Coser's analysis oversimplifies things somewhat, it is insightful and suggests important contrasts between productive and destructive conflict interaction (Deutsch, 1973). What criteria could one use to evaluate whether a conflict is productive? In large part, productive conflict interaction depends on flexibility. In constructive conflicts, members engage in a wide variety of behaviors ranging from coercion and threat to negotiation, joking, and relaxation in order to reach an acceptable solution. In contrast, parties in destructive conflicts are likely to be much less flexible because their goal is more narrowly defined: they are trying to defeat each other. Destructive conflict interaction is likely to have protracted, uncontrolled escalation cycles or prolonged attempts to avoid issues. In productive conflict, on the other hand, the interaction in the group will change direction often. Short cycles of escalation, de-escalation, avoidance, and constructive work on the issue are likely to occur as the participants attempt to manage the conflict.

Consider the Hotline case. The group exhibited a wide range of interaction styles, from the threat of a grievance to the cooperative attempt to reach a mutually satisfactory solution. Even though Diane and the members engaged in hostile or threatening interaction, they did not persist in this mode, and when the conflict threatened to escalate, they called in a third party. The conflict showed all the hallmarks of productive interaction. In a destructive conflict the members might have responded to Diane's grievance by suspending her, and Diane might have retaliated by suing or by attempting to discredit the center in the local newspaper. Her retaliation would have hardened others' positions and they might have fired her, leading to further retaliation. Alternatively, the Hotline conflict might have ended in destructive avoidance. Diane might have hidden her problem and the other members might have consciously or unconsciously abetted her by changing the subject when the murder came up or by avoiding talking to her at all. Diane's problem would probably have grown worse, and she might have had to quit. The center would then revert back to "normal" until the same problem surfaced again. While the damage done by destructive avoidance is much less serious in this case than that done by destructive escalation, it is still considerable: the Hotline loses a good worker, and the seeds of future losses remain. In both cases, it is not the behaviors themselves that are destructive—neither avoidance nor hostile arguments are harmful in themselves—but rather the **inflexibility** of the parties that locks them into escalation or avoidance cycles.

In productive conflicts, interaction is guided by the belief that all factions can attain important goals (Deutsch, 1973). The interaction reflects a sustained effort to bridge the apparent incompatibility of positions. This is in marked contrast to destruc-

tive conflicts where the interaction is premised on participants' belief that one side must win and the other must lose. Productive conflict interaction results in a solution satisfactory to all and produces a general feeling that the parties have gained something (e.g., a new idea, greater clarity of others' positions, a stronger sense of solidarity). In some cases, the win-lose orientation of destructive conflict stems from fear of losing. People attempt to defeat alternative proposals because they believe that if their positions are not accepted they will lose resources, self-esteem, or the respect of others. In other cases, win-lose interaction is sparked, not by competitive motives, but by the parties' fear of **working through** a difficult conflict. Groups that rely on voting to reach decisions often call for a vote when discussion becomes heated and the members do not see any other immediate way out of a hostile and threatening situation. Any further attempt to discuss the alternatives or to pursue the reasons behind people's positions seems risky. A vote can put a quick end to threatening interaction, but it also induces a win-lose orientation that can easily trigger destructive cycles. Members whose proposal is rejected must resist a natural tendency to be less committed to the chosen solution and may try to "even the score" in future conflicts. Productive conflict interaction is sometimes competitive; both parties must stand up for their own positions if a representative outcome is to be attained. A great deal of tension and hostility may result as people struggle with the conflict. Although parties in productive conflicts hold to their positions strongly, they are also open to movement when convinced that such movement will result in the best decision. The need to preserve power, save face, or make the opponent look bad does not stand in the way of change. In destructive conflict, parties often become polarized, and the defense of a nonnegotiable position becomes more important than working out a viable solution. This description of productive and destructive conflict interaction is obviously an idealization. We rarely observe a conflict that exhibits all the constructive or destructive qualities just mentioned; indeed, many conflicts exhibit both productive and destructive interaction. We maintain, however, that better conflict management will result if parties can sustain productive conflict interaction patterns.

Conflict As Interactive Behavior

Conflict is, by nature, interactive. It is never wholly under one person's control (Kriesberg, 1973). The other party's reactions and the person's anticipation of the other's response are extremely important. Any comment made during a conflict is made with some awareness or prediction about the likely response it will elicit. This predictive basis for any move in interaction creates a strong tendency for conflict interaction to become cyclic or repetitive. Suppose Robert criticizes Susan, an employee under his supervision, for her decreasing productivity. Susan may accept the criticism and explain why her production is down, thus reducing the conflict and moving toward a solution. Susan may also shout back and sulk, inviting escalation, or she may choose to say nothing and avoid the conflict, resulting in no improvement in the situation. Once Robert has spoken to Susan and she has responded, the situation is no longer totally under Robert's control: his next behavior will be a response to Susan's reaction. Robert's behavior, and its subsequent meaning to Susan, is dependent on the interchange between them. A behavioral cycle of initiation-response-counterresponse results from the conflict interchange. This cycle cannot be understood by breaking it into its parts, into the individual behaviors of Robert and Susan. It is more complex

than the individual behaviors and, in a real sense, has a "life" of its own. The cycle can be self-reinforcing, if, for example, Susan shouts back at Robert, Robert tries to discipline her, Susan become more recalcitrant, and so on, in an escalating spiral. The cycle could also limit itself if Robert responds to Susan's shouting with an attempt to calm her and listen to her side of the story. Conflict interaction cycles acquire a momentum of their own. They tend in a definite direction—toward escalation, toward avoidance and suppression, or toward productive work on the conflict. The situation becomes even more complex when we remember that Robert formulated his criticism on the basis of his previous experience with Susan. That is, Robert's move is based on his perception of Susan's likely response. In the same way, Susan's response is based not only on Robert's criticism, but on her estimate of Robert's likely reaction to her response. Usually such estimations are "intuitive"—that is, they are not conscious—but sometimes parties plot them out ("If I shout at Robert, he'll back down and maybe I won't have to deal with this"). They are always based on the parties' perceptions of each other, on whatever theories or beliefs each holds about the other's reactions. Because these estimates are only intuitive predictions, they may be wrong to some extent. They will be revised as the conflict unfolds, and this revision will largely determine what direction the conflict takes. The most striking thing about this predictive process is the extraordinary difficulties it poses for attempts to understand the parties' thinking. When Susan responds to Robert on the basis of her prediction of Robert's answer, from the outside we see Susan making an estimate of Robert's estimate of what she means by her response. If Robert reflects on Susan's intention before answering, we observe Robert's estimate of Susan's estimate of his estimate of what Susan meant. This string of estimates can increase without bounds if we try to pin down the originating point, and after a while the prospect is just as dizzying as a hall of mirrors.

Several studies of arms races (Richardson, 1960; North, Brody, & Holsti, 1963) and of marital relations (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967; Rubin, 1983; Scarf, 1987) and employee-supervisor interactions (Brown, 1983) have shown how this spiral of predictions poses a critical problem in conflicts. If the parties do not take the spiral into account, they run the risk of miscalculation. However, it is beyond the capacities of any of us to calculate all the possibilities. At best, people have extremely limited knowledge of the implications their actions hold for others, and their ability to manage conflicts is therefore severely curtailed. Not only are parties' behaviors inherently interwoven in conflicts, but their thinking and anticipations are as well. The key question [to address] is: **how does conflict interaction develop destructive patterns—radical escalation, prolonged or inappropriate avoidance of conflict issues, inflexibility—rather than constructive patterns leading to productive conflict management?** Conflict interaction is always poised on a precipice: one push can send it in a negative direction while another can send it in a positive direction. This [chapter] considers several major forces that direct conflicts and examines the problems people encounter in trying to control these forces in order to regulate their own conflict interaction.

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