

PEARSON



Managing Conflict Through Communication

EDITION  
NO. 05

DUDLEY D. CAHN | RUTH ANNA ABIGAIL

# Managing Conflict through Communication

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Fifth Edition

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# PREFACE

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## DEALING WITH CONFLICT REMAINS CHALLENGING

As we coauthors worked on revising our textbook for the fifth time, we reflected on all that has gone on in our lives since we started collaborating so many years ago. A lot has happened to each of us over these many years. These significant events jolted us into reality and forced us to consider our subject from new perspectives resulting in the fifth edition of our textbook.

While much has changed for us in recent years, one principle has held steadfast throughout all editions of our book: Many people still have a strong need to study conflict. People tend to feel negatively about conflict, and they do not handle confrontations well. We believe that the common mismanagement of conflict explains the bad name given to the subject. We intend to help you learn more constructive attitudes and more positive conflict management and resolution skills, so that you feel less apprehensive about engaging in interpersonal conflict and better able to manage and resolve it.

Conflict continues to be one of the “grand challenges” of our time, occurring because of deep divisions in our society that carry over into our interpersonal relationships. There are cultural divides between ethnic, racial, and religious groups. There are political and value barriers that separate conservatives and liberals. There are gender gaps between the sexes. There are economic and power divides between upper and lower economic and social classes. There are age barriers between our younger and older citizens. When these divides carry over into interpersonal relations, even people of similar backgrounds find differences difficult to overcome.

Where there is a divide, we communication teachers and researchers look for bridges. It is no surprise then that we have identified communication as the essential bridge in overcoming conflicts. As a first step the conflicting parties must meet to deal with the issues that divide them. They must take time out of their busy schedules, allocate resources they may find limited, pay attention to matters they may consider unimportant or frustrating, and listen in order to learn how to bridge the gap that separates them. Meeting together and paying attention to the issues and each other is an important first step, but more is needed. In this next step, the conflicting parties must communicate. How do they do that? What do they say? How do they say it? Because they have thoroughly researched the communication processes in conflict situations, communication scholars have a great deal to offer students interested in studying conflict. They

- offer a wide variety of tools for successfully managing conflict situations.
- are sensitive to ethical concerns as they create solutions to challenges such as conflict.
- view communication, conflict, the management of conflict, anger, stress, forgiveness, negotiation, and mediation as processes.

- study the role of stress and negative attitudes as key contributors to conflict—anger as an escalator of conflict and emotional residues as barriers to reconciliation.

The purpose of this textbook is to apply these contributions to the effective management of conflict. While the challenge of conflict initially appears enormous, the subject is divisible into more manageable parts or learning modules. Moreover, as a discipline, communication has identified many principles and techniques that prevent conflicts from turning violent and damaging the conflicting parties and their relationship. Some of these principles and techniques are preventive in nature; others repair channels of communication and restore relations.

## WHAT IS NEW IN THIS EDITION?

If we just consider all that has happened to us since our last edition, we are surprised at how much we wanted to change and add for this edition. Meanwhile, our students have caused us to realize that revising is necessary to better relate to them. They wanted more clarification, less redundancy, and longer treatment of some topics and less on others. They expressed their confusion to us and need for our help as they waded through the complex and challenging subject of interpersonal conflict. So what is different this time around? A lot!

- We have added a new chapter on interpersonal violence (titled Chapter 5: Managing Violent Tendencies), a topic that is receiving more attention in the study of communication and conflict.
- The theory chapter has been moved forward in the book and is now Chapter 3.
- The chapters on negotiation and mediation have been moved to Part III as Chapters 10 and 11.
- We combined the previously separate chapters on anger and stress into Chapter 8.
- Many chapters have been strengthened by adding theories and the findings of recent research studies that relate specifically to that topic.
- To make the text more useful to instructors who use classroom activities or teach in a discussion format, most chapters now include an exercise that captures the key idea of the chapter and a discussion assignment that applies the chapter's key ideas to a case study.

Our readership presents a challenge. While most college students continue to fall into the 18–22 single group who are interested in conflict issues related to dating, teachers, parents, and roommates, there are increasingly more “nontraditional” students taking college courses online and who reflect an older group, married or divorced, with children, and long-term employment, planning soon to retire, or presently serving our country in the military. They are more interested in issues related to their marriage, family, retirement, and military or workplace. We have tried to include issues and conflict examples that reflect the diversity of our students.

However, regardless of their age and marital status, we are struck by the fact that our students continue to come to us with little previous conflict training. Students of

all ages would like to know exactly how to confront someone they know personally and how to better manage their present conflicts. They want to know specifically what to say and exactly how to say it. Introducing the S-TLC system for responding to conflict, six steps to successful confrontation, and how to create effectively worded I-statements in Part I of the text responds to the students' need to learn immediately how to effectively deal with problems and issues they are presently facing.

As in the previous edition, Part I is intended to serve as an introduction to the study of conflict. Part II continues to emphasize the factors that escalate conflict and techniques for de-escalating it. However, we changed Part III to the idea of broadening the study of conflict to include negotiation, mediation, workplace conflict, and social conflict. Thus, the new edition addresses a wider variety of social contexts of interest to our students.

Throughout the textbook, we continue to provide practical advice concerning conflict along with theoretical notions about it. Each chapter is a learning module, beginning with specific objectives, followed by instruction including a summary clearly tied to the opening objectives, and finally ending with practical exercises that apply key ideas in the chapter to learners' lives and case studies. Our thinking is that successfully doing the exercises is an indication that our students have mastered the content.

As you use this book, remember that conflict often results in personal change. Expect to question thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that you have taken for granted in the past and to add new ideas and actions to your ways of thinking and behaving.

## LEE'S ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Although I am officially Dudley Cahn, I am known to my students, colleagues, and friends by the nickname of Lee. As in previous editions, I have my students to thank for their help and input. This is probably due to the fact that I now teach this course entirely online, which is quite a different experience from teaching face to face. Students seem more open to express themselves online, revealing what they don't know as much as what they do. From their comments, I am able to determine their needs and problems reading the text, doing the assignments, and discussing the key ideas. Because I found myself explaining more to my online students, I feel that there is a better way to organize the chapters and explain some of the key concepts and principles. Thanks to my students for their input and encouragement, the end result is a clearer work with a broader perspective than our earlier editions.

As I have done in earlier works, I would like to express my appreciation to the many scholars who have shared with me over the years their ideas on interpersonal conflict. Among them (in alphabetical order) are William Benoit, Nancy Burrell, Daniel Canary, Steve Duck, Sally Lloyd, Loreen Olson, Michael Roloff, Ray Ross, Teresa Sabourin, Stella Ting-Toomey, Steve Wilson, and Dolf Zillmann. Although my mentors have passed on, I want to acknowledge the important role they played in my life: Charles Brown, Donald Cushman, and Clare Danielsson. A day doesn't go by that I don't reflect on the influence these people had on me.

As a result of recently editing a scholarly book on family violence for SUNY Press, I learned a lot about conflict from my contributors. I would like to thank

Nancy Brule, Jessica Eckstein, SuZanne Enck-Wanzer, Loreen N. Olson, Felicia Roberts, Angela Swanson, Mari Elenar Villar, and Steven R. Wilson for helping me better understand how interpersonal conflict can lead to violent behavior.

Obviously, I have my coauthor to thank for her willingness to again work with me. The first edition was her textbook alone, but I have been privileged to work with her starting with our second and subsequent editions. We alternate the role of senior author, so that each of us has an opportunity to take the work in a little different direction and run with it. I am pleased that Ruth Anna let me pilot the ship this time around, while she monitored and approved the changes I proposed. Although we alternate senior authorship, we continue to collaborate and take mutual responsibility for each revision.

I also have my spouse to thank for her patience, understanding, and willingness to put up with my mood swings and occasional fuzziness she could see in my eyes as I would swing from attention to inattention, which occurred as I reflected on what I had recently written or realized that I should have written instead. Sharon has strongly encouraged my writing efforts and allowed me a lot of time and the necessary space to accomplish this project as she did for the ones before. I appreciate the fact that, while we have learned how to collaborate as our marriage evolved, she did not see these revisions as issues for family conflicts.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the role our adult children, Leanne Richards, Cort Happle, and Katherine Karpinski, have played in our lives and our four grandchildren, Jessica and Daria Richards, and Ethan and Kolby Karpinski.

## **RUTH ANNA'S ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I want to first say thank you to Lee for his hard work on this edition. He really made it possible. It would not have happened if I were leading the task this time.

I'd also like to thank the many students who used this book in my classes and offered suggestions for revisions, as well as letting me use their stories to illustrate important points. I'd also like to thank Barbara Baker and Shelley Lane. We all met at USC in 1979 and it would be hard for me to estimate the impact both have had on my life. Thanks, my good friends!

Thank you to the members of the School of Adult and Professional Studies at Azusa Pacific University, and Fred Garlett (EJ), my dean, who have all been a great support to me in my scholarly endeavors. Thanks especially to the "hall people" who help me maintain sanity and perspective: Frank Berry, Brent Wood, Stephanie Fenwick, and Sarah Visser, and colleague Gordon Jorgenson, who loves to make me laugh. Special thanks also to the Circle of Friends: Julia Underwood, Trish Hanes, Leah Klingseis, Rebecca Knippelmeyer, Caron Rand, Gillian Symonds, Joyce Kirk-Moore, and Melanie Weaver, and to my friends David Esselstrom, Doug Campbell, Joseph Smith, and Murray Flagg—you all know why.

Finally, I thank my family for all they do to help me be the person I am: my adult children, Kathy and David Lulofs, my dogs, Elisa and Jacques, and my sister, Vicki McGuire.

# Introduction to the Study of Conflict Communication

## OBJECTIVES

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

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

## KEY TERMS

accuracy  
adversely affect relationships  
civility  
communication  
conflict communication  
conflict management  
conflict metaphor  
conflict resolution  
cycle  
destructive conflict  
differentiation phase

incompatible goals  
incompatible means  
inevitability of conflict  
principle  
initiation phase  
interdependence  
interpersonal conflict  
linear model of communication  
meta-conflict perspective  
negative view of conflict  
positive view of conflict

prelude to conflict  
problematic situation  
process  
process view of conflict communication  
productive conflict  
resolution phase  
sense of urgency  
transactional model of communication  
triggering event

Conflict is one of the grand challenges of our time. It occurs because there are deep divisions in our society that carry over into our interpersonal relationships. There are cultural divides between ethnic, racial, and religious groups. There are political and value barriers that separate conservatives and liberals, gender gaps between the sexes, economic and power divides between upper and lower economic and social classes, and age barriers between younger and older citizens. While we typically think of these divides as the source of conflict in interpersonal relations, even people of similar backgrounds find it difficult to overcome their differences.

Where there is a divide, we must look for bridges. A common bridge for barriers in interpersonal relations is communication. As a first step in communicating, the conflicting parties must meet to deal with the issues that divide them. They must take time out of their busy schedules, pay attention to matters they may consider unimportant, perhaps spend money and allocate often-limited resources, and listen to people they would like to ignore. In so doing, the conflicting parties create or repair channels of communication and thus lay a foundation for bridging the gap that separates them. Sometimes it takes outside intervention to bring the conflicting parties together and help them communicate.

## WHAT THIS TEXTBOOK OFFERS YOU

For the longest time, I thought conflict was like having a big wave come at me on the beach. If I moved fast enough, I might be able to dive under it. Sometimes I could just stand my ground against it. And other times, it knocked me on my rear. But until recently, I didn't really think I could ride that wave, to turn it into something useful. I'm not sure I can do that with all my conflicts—I am better off diving under some, but they don't knock me down as often as they used to.

If you are like most people, you probably would rather not have conflict knock you down or make you dive out of the way to avoid it. On the contrary, you probably want to know how to confront someone you know personally and how to better handle your present conflicts. You want to know what you can say and how you can say it. To meet this need, we designed this textbook to help you learn how to use effective communication behavior to manage your everyday conflicts.

Our approach to managing conflict provides solid information at the outset that prepares you to start dealing with your conflicts immediately, followed by information that deepens your understanding of conflict. In Part I, we define interpersonal conflict and conflict management, describe interpersonal conflict as a process, and provide an overview to the different means or cycles of communicating in a conflict situation. We introduce theories that can be applied to conflict to help us better understand what is going on beneath the surface. In addition, we demonstrate useful techniques for communicating in conflict situations: assertiveness, steps to effectively confront conflicts, and our S-TLC system for effectively managing conflicts. In Part II, we discuss violent tendencies and how to manage them, the ways in which people's communication behaviors contribute to the climate of the conflict, and we demonstrate how to better manage your handling of various factors that contribute to conflict escalation and containment—namely, loss

of face, stress and anger, and emotional residues needing forgiveness. In Part III, we discuss various ideas that broaden your understanding of conflict to include negotiation, mediation, workplace conflicts, and social conflict.

In this chapter we define interpersonal conflict and discuss some of the different ways people view it. We believe that conflict is not simply a part of life; conflict is life—an everyday occurrence. People regularly experience times when their wants and desires are contradictory to the wants and desires of people important to them. Equally important, we can see no reason for conflicts to ever evolve into violent behavior. Conflicts exist as a fact of life, but we believe that they do not have to escalate out of control. When we effectively manage our conflicts, we can convert destructive conflicts into productive ones. These ideas make it worth your time and effort to learn how to more effectively manage your interpersonal conflicts.

At the end of this chapter is an “Introductory Exercise” that you may wish to begin right away, because you need to observe your conflict behavior over several days or more. The exercise is designed to make you aware of the key concepts we discuss in this chapter as they actually apply to you.

## THE NATURE OF CONFLICT

One challenge we often encounter is that people are not aware of all the conflicts they are having with other people. The stereotype of conflict is screaming, yelling, throwing dishes, and/or swearing, if not actually punching or pushing each other. However, we are in conflict when not speaking to each other, too. To grasp the full extent of our conflict activity, we need to explore the meaning of the term and people’s perception of it.

The English language uses many different terms as synonyms for interpersonal conflict or our experience of it: *confrontation, verbal argument, disagreement, differences of opinion, avoidance of confrontation, avoiding others, changing the topic, problem-solving discussion, interpersonal violence, physical abuse, sexual abuse, verbal abuse, silent treatment, stonewalling, glaring at one another, making obscene gestures, expressions of anger, hostile reactions, ignoring the other, unhappy relationships, simply giving in, accommodating, going along reluctantly, not making waves, competition, negotiation, bargaining, mediation, disputing, quarreling, threatening, and insulting*. Even though this is a long list, you can probably add to it. Because there are so many events people refer to as conflict, we think it is important that we have a common reference point in the form of a definition for interpersonal conflict as we begin this text.

### Defining Interpersonal Conflict

We define **interpersonal conflict** as a *problematic situation* with the following four unique characteristics:

1. the conflicting parties are *interdependent*,
2. they have the perception that they seek *incompatible goals or outcomes* or they favor *incompatible means* to the same ends,



3. the perceived incompatibility has the potential to *adversely affect the relationship* if not addressed, and
4. there is a *sense of urgency* about the need to resolve the difference.

If you are like a lot of us, when you first read a definition of a key term, you don't realize all that the definition entails. So, let's consider what is interesting, unique, and useful about the way we define interpersonal conflict. First, our definition focuses on the idea of those **problematic situations** that arise because partners perceive that they seek different outcomes or they favor different means to the same ends. We view conflict as two or more competing responses to a single event, differences between and among individuals, mutual hostility between individuals or groups, or a problem needing resolution.

Instead of narrowly defining interpersonal conflict as an expressed struggle or a verbal exchange,<sup>1</sup> we recognize that some conflicts are not overt, apparent, or open. Just as one can claim that "we cannot not communicate," a conflict may exist even when people are not arguing or even talking to each other. We can recognize that we are experiencing a conflict long before we actually say anything about it. By emphasizing the notion of a conflict situation, we can include people who are not speaking to each other, purposely avoiding contact, giving each other the silent treatment, using nonverbal displays to indicate conflict, or who are sending mixed messages to each other. For example, one study found that when people experienced negative emotions, they became more evasive and equivocal.<sup>2</sup> Thus, it is likely that when people are first thinking about a conflict, they may not even say anything about it; rather, they may evade the topic or communicate about it in ambivalent terms.

By emphasizing the interdependence between or among the conflicting parties, we focus on conflict in interpersonal relationships. **Interdependence** occurs when those involved in a relationship characterize it as continuous and important, making it worth the effort to maintain. We want to underscore the fact *that interpersonal conflicts occur with people who are important to us and who we expect to continue seeing or working with in the future*. We may argue with a stranger, have a difficult time returning a defective product to a store, or endure the bad driving habits of another on the road, but these are not examples of interpersonal conflict because the conflicting parties do not have an interpersonal relationship. Having said that, some of the skills involved in arguments with strangers overlap the skills taught in this book. If you have to return a product to a store, for example, and you expect resistance or difficulty, explaining the situation carefully using the skills outlined in later chapters should boost your chances of success. However, in this book we want to emphasize the importance of using principles, concepts, and skills that improve our ability to handle conflicts with the important people in our lives—family, roommates, romantic partners, friends, neighbors, and colleagues at work.

An incompatibility lies at the heart of a problematic situation. **Incompatible goals** occur when we are seeking different outcomes; for example, we each want to buy a different car, but we can only afford to buy one. Incompatible goals may also entail personal habits that clash, as when one person in a living situation is less bothered by clutter than the other. **Incompatible means** occur when we want to achieve the same goal but differ in how we should do so; for example, we agree on the same car, but not on whether to finance it or pay cash.

Mismanaged conflicts could **adversely affect relationships**, meaning that conflicts can make people feel uncomfortable when together, dissatisfied with their partners, and lead them to desire change. If people dominate their partners and always win their arguments, the partners may want to exit the relationship. If conflicts leave people feeling dissatisfied, they may refuse to forgive, seek revenge, or become abusive. If people feel helpless in a relationship, they may grow apathetic, uncaring, or uninterested in it. If people avoid dealing with issues, their relationship may stagnate because problems are not getting resolved. The point is that our relationships generally deteriorate when we manage them poorly. Rather, people should look for opportunities to make their partners feel better and cause their relationship to grow. If they perceive that they cannot do that, they may look elsewhere for relationship satisfaction.

Our definition emphasizes that the issue or problem underlying the conflict has a **sense of urgency**, defined as reaching a point where it needs effective management sooner rather than later. Although letting problems mount up is usually not a good idea, people often let unresolved issues fester and grow until they can't take it any longer and explode. The interpersonal conflicts that interest us most are those that have this sense of urgency because they are approaching the point where they must receive attention or else. This is why there is a potential for adverse effects on the relationship if the issues are not addressed.

## The Inevitability of Conflict

Conflict should be accepted as a fact of life. Simons wrote over 40 years ago that at one end, conflict is seen as a disruption of the normal workings of a system; at the other, conflict is seen as a part of all relationships.<sup>3</sup> A number of recent studies have demonstrated that conflict is a “common and inevitable feature” in close social relationships.<sup>4</sup> We encounter it at home, at school, and at work.

I never thought that I would have “roommate” problems after graduating from college. Actually, the problems are with my new husband, but they remind me of what I went through in college—when to do the dishes, how to sort the mail, who should take messages, when does the trash go out, who picks up after his (!) dog, who does the housework. I am amazed at the number of issues that arise when living with another person.

Think over years past and recall the conflicts, complaints, or grievances you had with these three types of people: (1) neighbors living a few houses away, (2) next-door neighbors, and (3) family members (or teammate, close friend, roommate, or romantic partner). With the more distant neighbors, the appearance of their home and yard, noise, or their pets and children trespassing on your property may have upset you. These problems can also happen with a next-door neighbor, but now you may also encounter disagreements over property lines, dropping in on you too often, borrowing tools and not returning them, unsightly fences, invasions of privacy, making noises far into the night, blinding lights, talking to you every time you go out into your yard (especially when sunbathing). What about your family members? Here you could probably write a book. You may have had disagreements over study habits, sleeping habits, smoking, snoring,

messiness, household chores, use of a car, friends who are noisy or sleep over, paying bills, buying furniture, TV, tools, and borrowing clothes. If you substitute a teammate, close friend, or romantic partner, you have likely accumulated a list of disagreements.

Undoubtedly, you can add many examples to these lists. The question is this: What happens to conflicts as relationships become closer, more personal, and more interdependent? The answer is that conflict becomes increasingly more likely, hence inevitable. We call this the **inevitability of conflict principle**. If you compare the lists you created for the three types of relationships above, you will probably find that as the relationship becomes closer and more interdependent (from a distant neighbor to a next-door neighbor and from a next-door neighbor to a roommate, teammate, close friend, or romantic partner):

- the more issues are likely to occur,
- the more trivial (minor) complaints become significant ones, and
- the more intense your feelings are.

As we go from our relationship with a distant neighbor to that of a roommate, we are not only becoming physically closer, but we also feel emotionally closer. In addition, the behavior of someone close to us usually has more consequences for us than the behavior of those more physically and emotionally distant. This interdependence means that the individuals involved can become problematic by interfering with each other's goal achievement or means to reaching those goals whether the goals are emotional, psychological, or material.

Researchers have identified seven types of emotional, psychological, and material resources that produce satisfaction in long-term romantic relationships.<sup>5</sup> As you might have guessed, those aspects that provide satisfaction in relationships have the potential to create conflict when people perceive they are lacking. In order of importance, they are:

- love—nonverbal expressions of positive regard, warmth, or comfort
- status—verbal expressions of high or low prestige or esteem
- service—labor of one for another
- information—advice, opinions, instructions, or enlightenment
- goods—material items
- money—financial contributions
- shared time—time spent together

In the best kind of long-term romantic relationship, partners believe that they get what they deserve. Although the above list focuses on romantic partners, many of these seven resources are relevant to other types of interpersonal relationships, including roommates, neighbors, friends, coworkers, and family.

The point is that we can expect more conflict as we become closer to and more interdependent with some people. No wonder Stamp found that conflict plays a role in the creation and maintenance of interpersonal relationships.<sup>6</sup> The inevitability of conflict principle runs contrary to the idea that, if we look long and hard, we can find people with whom we can share conflict-free lives. It means that we should cease our efforts to find perfect people and learn how to manage the conflicts we are sure to have with those closest to us. We need to learn how to

deal with minor as well as major conflicts, how to maintain our objectivity when engaged in conflict, and how to keep our self-control. The narrative below illustrates these ideas:

Before I started keeping track, I didn't think that I was involved in many conflicts. Now, I see that I have a lot of them, and that I could have handled them differently. Acquaintances, outsiders, and strangers make me angry, but I choose not to get into a verbal conflict with them. It just isn't worth the time or effort. Basically, I just walk away or change the topic.

I also noted that I deal with my conflicts differently with people closest to me. I have the greatest difficulty reaching an agreement usually with the people that I care most about. It frustrates me when the people closest to me cannot understand how I feel. Such is the case with my father. He is home alone all day and does nothing to keep himself busy. In my opinion I think he enjoys getting into conflicts with me just to have something to do and to make me communicate with him.

Although conflict is inevitable, we argue that it need not get out of hand and perhaps turn violent. Unfortunately, too many people see violence as a necessary way to deal with conflict, but other options exist. By teaching nonviolent solutions to problems, setting an example in our daily lives, and raising our children to resolve interpersonal conflicts peacefully, we are helping to reduce violence as a serious social problem. Thus, learning to avoid escalation (i.e., learning de-escalation) is an important goal of this textbook. We next turn our attention to the idea of managing our conflicts.

## CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

### Defining Conflict Management as a Skill

Everyday language reflects the variety of ways in which we regard conflict: We talk about handling conflict, dealing with it, avoiding it, or resolving it. We define **conflict management** as the communication behavior a person employs based on his or her analysis of a conflict situation. Another concept, **conflict resolution**, refers to only one alternative in which parties solve a problem or issue and expect it not to arise again. Conflict management involves alternative ways of dealing with conflict, including resolution or avoiding it altogether.<sup>7</sup> Effective conflict management occurs when our communication behavior produces mutual understanding and an outcome that is agreeable to everyone concerned.<sup>8</sup>

Note that we define conflict management as communication behavior because behaviors can become skills, suggesting that we can learn from our past mistakes and improve the way we handle conflicts. In recent years, communication scholars have focused on the idea of “communication competence,” describing communication skills that are useful in conflict situations. When we can successfully perform a communication behavior (such as listening without interrupting) and repeat that behavior when the situation calls for it, we have a communication skill. Competent communicators not only try to repeat the skill when need be; they also are able to perform that skill without hesitation.<sup>9</sup>

One way to understand communication competence is to refer to a television dance competition, where one of the judges made a distinction between moving and dancing. He accused one contestant of merely moving around the stage. Dancing, he said, requires experience, good training, and practice. When one dances, the person engages in a performance. Those who simply move about do not express any feeling or engage others. We can use this analogy to compare communication behaviors to communication skills.

Skills are not innate; they are learned. We develop them through experience. The only way you learn how to handle conflict situations more competently is to work through the conflicts you encounter—that is, learning from this book and trying to practice your new skills. Due to the complexity of the task, few successfully ride a bicycle the first time. Most fall off. Sometimes they are lucky and stop before hurting themselves. Soon, with a great deal of concentration, riding a bike is manageable, and then it becomes something that is almost second nature. The problem is that most of us are more willing to learn how to ride bicycles than we are to learn conflict management skills. Communication competence takes knowledge about the way conflict works, knowledge of the skills that are used in conflict situations, and practice. This book discusses the skills associated with framing messages in conflict situations—specific message behaviors that have proven effective in various kinds of conflicts. The goal is to connect thinking about conflicts with acting in conflicts so as to choose the most effective behaviors possible.

In addition to focusing on behaviors that can become skills, our definition of conflict management has two more important implications. First, our definition implies that you have choices to make when in a conflict situation such as how to communicate. You can choose among various options to deal with conflicts. You may avoid or confront conflicts. You may react peacefully or violently. You may treat others politely with respect or verbally abuse others. You may simply give in or insist on “having everything your way.”

Second, our view suggests that, in order to effectively manage conflict, you must analyze it by taking a meta-conflict perspective. You may recall that one of the fundamentals of interpersonal communication is the idea of meta-communication, where one tries to objectively look at interaction between people and talk about it intelligently. We might sit back, observe a couple of friends interact, and then describe their interaction pattern to them. Perhaps we observe that one person dominated the conversation, that is, talked the most and controlled the topic of discussion. In conflict, the ability to take a **meta-conflict perspective** means that you can look back on the conflicts you have experienced, analyze what you did well and what you did poorly, and learn from your mistakes. Eventually, you may even monitor your present interpersonal conflicts, realize what is going on, alter your behavior, and better manage the conflicts.

## Linear and Transactional Approaches to Communication

Communication competence has changed from teaching the linear approach to communication to the transactional approach. In basic communication courses, you probably learned that communication was once viewed as one person sending a message to another person (receiver) through some channel. Such a view of

communication also contained a provision for noise (interference) and for receiver feedback, so that the receiver could indicate to the message sender that she or he received the message as intended. We can apply this view of communication as managers of conflict. One conflicting party (the message sender) may send any of the following messages to the other party of the conflict (the message receiver):

I am not speaking to you.

I don't want to talk about that.

I disagree with you.

I want to fight.

I don't like you.

I don't like what you said.

I don't want to see you anymore.

I want something to change.

The sender of such messages may use any of the following channels:

Face-to-face

Synchronous via some medium like a cell phone or instant messaging

Asynchronous via an email, text message, or a relay person as the message carrier

Noise may consist of distractions in the face-to-face environment (such as TV, other people, or loud sounds) or technical difficulties that delete messages via the Internet or cut off contact on a cell phone.

In a conflict, feedback from others may consist of nonverbal reactions, such as facial cues (anger, hurt, sadness), body movements (standing up or walking out), gestures (making a fist, becoming more dynamic and lively), tone of voice (screaming, yelling), or verbal responses (name-calling or swearing).

In the above paragraphs, we described a **linear model of communication**, using the words sender, receiver, channel, noise, and feedback. For the most part, this model emphasizes **accuracy**: Is what was “received” the same meaning as what was “intended or sent”?

While this approach can be helpful to our understanding, it is a narrow view of communication. When applied to conflict, the linear model limits our view of interpersonal conflict as something we do to someone. For example, we might take a position and try to convince the other of our view.

While the above description of conflict and communication may sound familiar to many of us, interpersonal conflict is a lot more complicated than the simple sending and receiving of messages. When conflicts arise, they arise because of the way both people act with respect to one another. In essence, we make our conflicts together; it is rare that a conflict is entirely the fault of one person in the relationship. Recognizing that, we would hope to create and manage a more productive conflict—one that begins with a problem and ends when conflicting parties agree on what to do about it.

From a linear point of view, our focus is on the end result, which means getting the other to change his or her mind or behavior to coincide with our position. In addition, using a linear model to explain conflict often results in trying to fix the “blame” of the conflict situation on one person or another, not recognizing that both people in a conflict situation contribute to the emergence of the conflict. In